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The Strangers' Gate

by

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CHAPTER I

Mr. Nigel Beverley, seated before his desk in the handsomely furnished private office of the Anglo-Orlacian Trust Company, glanced with a distinct frown at the card which his secretary had just brought in to him. He read it aloud as though for the benefit of his companion and of the demure-looking young lady who was standing by his side.

"'Marya [Princess] Mauranesco.' The 'Princess,' I should tell you, is in brackets. And what is this?" he went on, scrutinising the rest of the announcement. "'Violinist, Grill Room, Germanic, 7 p.m.-10 p.m. Restaurant, Germanic, 10.30 P.M.-12.'"

"God bless my soul!" an elderly gentleman, in strikingly correct morning clothes and wearing light spats, who was seated in an easy chair opposite, exclaimed. "Is this the sort of visitor you get down in the City on a busy morning, Nigel? Violinist at the Germanic restaurant! What's that got to do with us?"

Nigel Beverley, with the card still between his fingers, glanced up at his secretary.

"Perhaps Miss Dent can explain," he remarked drily. "Whatever made you bring this card in, five minutes before an important meeting? You ought to know perfectly well that I am not likely to see anyone—not even the Governor of the Bank of England."

The girl leaned over and with the tip of her little finger tapped a corner of the card which he had not noticed.

"From Orlac," she pointed out. "As the meeting is largely concerned with affairs in that country, Mr. Beverley, and the young lady declared that her business was of the utmost importance, I thought it best at any rate to let you know that she was here."

Her employer laid the card upon the desk.

"Miss Dent," he remonstrated, his tone kindly but reproachful, "you know quite well that the board-room is half-filled already. The meeting is called for half-past eleven, and it is now twenty-past."

"I should have pointed that out to the young lady, sir," she explained, "but Sir Charles Brinkley has just telephoned begging that you will give him ten minutes. His car has met with a slight mishap, but he will be here at a quarter to twelve."

"That's all very well," Beverley replied, "but we can't interview young ladies who play the violin down here in the City a few minutes before an important meeting—even if they do come from Orlac. Tell her to write a note instead, and let me know her reasons for wishing for an interview; and I will see her for a moment, if I think it necessary, after the meeting—or this afternoon."

The girl turned away without remark, closing the door softly behind her.

"Sorry about Brinkley, sir," Beverley apologised.

"So am I," was the irritated reply. "I hate being kept waiting on an occasion—an important occasion—like this. Serves me right for ever having promised to make the blasted speech. I have forgotten every word I had to say already."

"It's only a vote of thanks," was the other's smooth reminder. "You will do that on your head. Just the bare words, and anything that comes into your mind at the moment. There isn't a hitch anywhere, you see. No worrying questions or anything of that sort. Everyone will be in a jolly good humour. So they ought to be, with a report like ours."

The elderly gentleman, who figured in Dehrett as "the Earl of Portington," and who was his companion's prospective father-in-law, grunted.

"All very well for you fellows. You are on your legs half the time, making speeches. Twice a year is enough for me; once at the Royal Agricultural Show, and a few words at the annual meeting of the Fox-hunting Association...Damn it all, here's that girl of yours back again!"

Miss Dent's tone was really apologetic this time.

"I am so sorry, Mr. Beverley," she said, "but the young woman is very much in earnest. She says that she must talk to you before the meeting takes place. She does not speak good English and is not easy to understand, but it seems that her brother, who intended to call on you, has been detained, and she is taking his place."

"But what about?" Beverley asked in mild but somewhat irritated expostulation. "What does she want?"

Lord Portington suddenly remembered a visit to the Germanic a few nights before and had an inspiration.

"Why not see her for a minute, Nigel?" he suggested. "Then, as soon as Brinkley arrives, we can all go in together."

The younger man shrugged his shoulders.

"As you will, sir," he agreed. "You may show the young lady in, then, Miss Dent. Tell her that she must not stay for more than five minutes."

The secretary disappeared. Nigel Beverley sat back in his chair and assumed the stern expression of the man of affairs who is yielding unwillingly to an unreasonable request. The effort was by no means an easy one, for besides being an exceedingly good-looking man with clean-cut features and a wholesome out-of-door complexion, there was a gleam of humour in his unwavering blue eyes and at the corners of his otherwise firm mouth. Portington, who was really short-sighted and was wondering whether it was the same girl, rubbed his eyeglass and adjusted it. The door was quietly opened.

"The young lady to see you, sir," Miss Dent announced.

Princess Marya Mauranesco entered the room.

The effect of the girl's entrance was perhaps exemplified by its reaction upon the two men. Both had seemed at first inclined to remain seated. Both, however, before she reached the desk, had risen to their feet. She seemed a little uncertain as to whom to address. Beverley pointed to a chair.

"My name is Beverley," he said, "and I am president of the Anglo-Orlacian Trust Company. Won't you sit down? I must tell you that I can spare only three or four minutes. We have an important meeting to attend."

The girl smiled as she sank gracefully into the chair, and from that moment Lord Portington was perfectly willing to forget all about the meeting. Beverley, although he dimly realised the charms of his visitor, was of sterner mould. He awaited her explanation with ill-concealed impatience.

"But it is about that meeting," she explained, "that I come. You must not hold it."

"Not hold it! What do you mean?" he asked brusquely.

"Well, if you hold it you must not say what you say here, then."

She drew from the modest bag she was carrying a folded-up newspaper cutting. Beverley recognised it at a glance. It was a copy of an interview he had given recently to a well-known journalist.

"Why not?" he demanded.

There was no trace of a smile upon her face now. She looked, indeed, a little pathetic.

"Because—you must please not be angry—it is not true."

"What is there in that interview which is not true?"

She sat very upright in her chair, the thin, nervous fingers of her right hand gripping its arm. Her eyes were fixed upon Beverley. She was utterly serious. In a remote sort of way she was entirely beautiful.

"I shall try to explain," she began. "You forgive if I make mistakes. In that talk you told the man that the supply of this new mineral, which is mixed with some other metal, is to be found only in the Kingdom of Orlac."

"So far as we know at present," Beverley corrected gently.

"Yes, but you add," she continued, "that this mineral is only to be found in the mountains at Klast, which you have leased from the Crown and where you have sunk the great mine."

"That is the truth," he declared.

The girl shook her head.

"Oh, no," she contradicted. "In another part of Orlac there is also to be found this mineral."

"You are mistaken," he assured her. "We have paid large fees to scientists and metallurgists, who have examined the whole country. No trace of bauxite has been discovered anywhere except in the mountains which we have leased. Apart from that, may I ask what you know about it?"

"Nothing at all," she admitted. "It is my brother who knows."

"Why is he not here himself?"

She coughed slightly. She was evidently embarrassed.

"It was his wish to be here," she confided. "He was—prevented."

She glanced at Lord Portington, whose expression told her nothing. She looked back at the younger man and then continued with a little deprecating gesture.

"He could not come. You wish to know the truth? He is in prison."

"A good place for him, I should think—or a lunatic asylum," Beverley remarked.

"But that is not kind," the girl protested. "Rudolph was unfortunate."

"How did your brother get into prison?" he asked. "For making false statements, I imagine."

"Oh no," she remonstrated with a little shiver. "And yet—" She hesitated. "I do not know. It might have been something like that. We are all very poor—very poor indeed—in Orlac. My brother speaks languages. He takes tourists round sometimes. An American family engaged him to travel with them through the country, and it seems that he made a mistake in the accounts."

"Indeed," was Beverley's dry comment.

"It was not the fault of my poor brother," she declared. "He never had much understanding of figures, and he is inclined to be extravagant. These people were very unkind to him. They took him before a magistrate and he was sent to prison. A Mauranesco of Orlac has never known such disgrace. It was very terrible."

Beverley glanced at the clock which stood upon the table.

"Young lady," he said, "we have listened most patiently to all you have had to say, but you have not yet explained the reason for this visit."

"Brinkley has not turned up yet, you know, Nigel," Portington intervened. "Better let the young lady finish her story. We must remember that she is in a strange country and naturally she finds our language a little difficult."

The girl flashed a grateful glance across at him.

"The money which my brother Rudolph borrowed," she explained, turning eagerly to Beverley, "he took to buy some shares in your company so that he could attend the meeting to-day."

"What was he going to do when he got there?" Beverley asked.

"I am not sure," she confessed. "I expected a letter from him this morning. I believe he thought that you would buy those shares from him at a great deal of money sooner than have anyone in the meeting ask stupid questions."

Beverley leaned forward and pressed a bell on his desk. Marya Mauranesco looked at him questioningly.

"What is that for?" she asked.

"To have my secretary show you out."

"But is that polite?" she continued with a little quiver of the lips.

"I say, Nigel, old chap," Portington put in, "aren't you being a little severe? Evidently this young lady doesn't understand much about business. I think that we ought to hear everything that she has to say."

She looked at him once more with gratitude in her eyes.

"How kind you are," she said softly. "What you say is true. I know nothing about business. I only know what my brother told me: that there is more bauxite in Orlac and it is not upon the property which your company has leased. Wait—" she opened her bag, drew out a small piece of rock and laid it upon the desk. "He said," she concluded, "that anyone who understood minerals would know what that streak meant."

Beverley picked up the fragment and examined the scarred end of it. His glance was only a cursory one.

"Well," he admitted, "so far as my knowledge goes, I should say that that streak was bauxite. How do I know where it came from, though?"

"That is what my brother wishes to tell you," she said reproachfully. "It was found in our country, but nowhere near the Klast Mine. He is very clever. He has studied at a great college in Paris. He has a degree in geology."

"And he is now in prison!"

The door was quietly opened. Miss Dent stood passively in the background. Beverley rose to his feet.

"You have brought us some very interesting information, young lady," he said kindly. "I am sorry to say that I do not believe a word of it. I am not blaming you. I will admit that you have probably been misled."

The girl looked at him in surprise.

"But this," she protested, touching the fragment of rock, "does it not speak for itself?"

"There is without a doubt a trace of bauxite there," Beverley agreed. "It is easily come by. We are finding it every day at our mine at Klast. There is not the slightest evidence to prove that it did not come from our own mine."

"I don't think we can dismiss the young lady like this," Portington remonstrated, "You must make allowances for Mr. Beverley," he went on, turning towards her with a little bow. "You see, the hour of the meeting has already passed and we could not possibly discuss this matter at present. Perhaps we might, later in the day."

"But will you not wish to tell the people at the meeting what I have come to tell you?" the girl asked. "Ought you not to contradict what Mr. Beverley has said? It is here in print, you remember. My brother has discovered that there is bauxite to be found elsewhere in the kingdom. You must tell the company that you have made a mistake—"

"The present meeting," Beverley interrupted, "is concerned only with the matters which have happened during the last six months up to the date when it was summoned. It is not the place for the discussion of this idle story which you have brought us."

She looked at him steadily and Beverley was conscious of a most uncomfortable sensation.

"You think, then, that I have told you a story which is not true?"

Miss Dent tactfully intervened.

"Sir Charles Brinkley is on his way up in the lift, Mr. Beverley," she announced.

Lord Portington rose to his feet.

"You see—er—Princess," he explained, "it is impossible for us to go further into the subject at the moment. May we ask Miss Dent to take you into the waiting room below? It is very comfortable, believe me, and the meeting will not last long. As soon as it is over we will consider anything further you may have to say."

The girl stood quite still—very remote, very subdued, it seemed to Beverley.

"I will wait until your meeting is over," she agreed.

"Miss Dent, will you do as Lord Portington suggests?" her employer enjoined. "You had better let His Lordship know exactly where she is, after the meeting."

Marya of Mauranesco looked steadily into his eyes.

"Perhaps, then," she said, "I do not see you again?"

"Probably not," he answered in an almost childlike spirit of defiance to the challenge which lurked in her tone. "I will wish you good morning. Lord Portington is a director of the company, and if he thinks it necessary to investigate your statement it will be done."

Her gesture as she turned away was a trifle enigmatic. She left the room with the secretary. The folding doors at the other end of the office were thrown open. Brinkley, who had just arrived full of apologies, led the way into the board-room. The door closed to the sound of muffled applause.

CHAPTER II

Lord Portington met with several minor difficulties when, at the conclusion of a highly satisfactory meeting during which he flattered himself he had fulfilled the position of vice-chairman with tact and dignity, he went in search of this unusual young lady from Orlac. She was seated in an easy chair in the waiting room, a morning paper had slipped from her fingers onto the carpet, her eyes were inscrutably fixed upon a little patch of blue sky visible through the top of the tall window. She rose to her feet with obvious relief at his arrival. She looked over his shoulder towards the door.

"Where is Mr. Beverley?" she asked. "He is not coming?"

Portington shook his head.

"He has appointed me his deputy. You can tell me everything you choose about that most unprepossessing lump of rock and I will pass it on to him faithfully. I see that it is past one o'clock. It will give me great pleasure if you will lunch with me."

"Mr. Beverley—he does not come, too?"

"Not much in Beverley's line—festivals in the middle of the day," Portington explained. "A brainy fellow but a dull dog sometimes. I have a car waiting. Where would you like to go?"

She hesitated.

"I am not sure. There are several more things I should like to have said to Mr. Beverley. The words come with such difficulty when I speak in your tongue."

Portington's fingers strayed to his upper lip. He had finished his military career as a Colonel in the Yeomanry and he rather fancied the remains of his scrubby but neatly kept little moustache.

"Won't I do as well?" he asked with a smile. "I am not sure that you will not find me easier to get on with than Nigel Beverley."

"He was rather rude to me," she said, "but it was perhaps my fault that I did not explain myself properly."

"You shall explain things to me," he proposed, leading her towards the door. "Over a bottle of champagne, if you like. Not that I often take it myself in the middle of the day," he went on, "but there must always be exceptions, of course. Where would you like to lunch?"

"I do not mind," she replied, still a little doubtfully. "I cook my own meals always in my small apartment. I have never been to any other restaurant but the Germanic."

Portington was somewhat startled. He hesitated as he handed her into his limousine. For a real critic of her sex—and he rather fancied himself in that direction—it was quite easy to appreciate the beauty of her slim but soft body underneath that shabby frock, the grace of her movements and indeed the perfection of every gesture. All the same, her hat would have been dear at anything more than half a sovereign and cleaned gloves are not often seen in the haunts which he patronized. After a moment's consideration he decided upon Soho.

"An old-fashioned place just coming to life again," he remarked. "We will go to Kettner's."

"To me it is the same thing," she acknowledged. "I like very much good food but it must be simple. That is why I like to cook for myself."

"How long have you been in this country?" he asked.

"Three weeks," she told him. "At first I could not breathe. Now it is better but I do not like it. I wish the engagement I came to fill had been in Paris."

"You girls are all the same," he grumbled. "Paris! No other place is worth looking at."

"But I do not know," she confided, "because I have never been there."

"Never been to Paris?" he repeated in astonishment.

She shook her head.

"I came from Orlac by the cheapest route," she explained. "We travelled very slowly in a noisy, dirty train and we came through Belgium."

"You never went to Paris to school?"

There was something a little grim about her gentle smile.

"I went to the convent school in Klast, our capital city," she confided. "There I learnt very little. No one seemed to have any money to pay for me. They made my father a General in the war and he was killed and there was no pension. You must not think that I am rich because I am a Princess. My brother works for a Tourist Agency; my mother made dresses, before she died, for the ladies who could still afford to go to Court. The palace that was once ours has been made into flats and we are permitted by the proprietor to occupy the top one. Now I earn more than anyone else in the family has ever earned—and it is not much—playing the violin."

"I think that you should earn a great deal," he assured her. "You play the violin in a style of your own very beautifully. I was one of the first to hear you."

She smiled—a wan little smile of acknowledgement.

"Sometimes," she continued after a moment's pause, "I sing a little song. Then they pay more. I put 'Princess' on my card because that is my title and the management made me do it or they would not have engaged me. English people seem so much to like titles that they sometimes behave as though they were not very accustomed to them. You are a Lord, are you not?"

He nodded.

"Just an Earl," he told her. "The lowest thing but one in the peerage. Recent creation, too. I am only the third."

"My brother is the thirtieth Prince of MauranESCO—and he is in prison for stealing. He has been in prison before, too," she went on thoughtfully. "He is not, I am afraid, very honest. What is he to do? I hope there will be no more MauranESCOs or they will die of starvation."

"That sounds very sad," Portington remarked. "I think we must try and be a little kinder to you over here than the world has been so far."

"What do you mean?" she asked curiously. "You find me a husband—yes?"

Lord Portington coughed. He felt that such suggestions as to her future were a little premature.

"Well, we shall see," he replied. "Here we are."

They descended at the restaurant and an eager *maitre d'hôtel* conducted them to a quiet corner table. Marya approved of the luncheon he ordered—grilled sole and lamb cutlets—but declined champagne.

"A glass of red wine, if you like—Carlowitz, if they have it, or a French claret not heavy."

"Cocktail?"

She hesitated but finally shook her head.

"You will be sorry you brought me out," she warned him. "I know so little about the things one should eat and drink."

"How old are you?" he asked.

She drew her passport from her bag and handed it to him. He read it with interest.

"Eighteen and a half!" he exclaimed. "And you are travelling about alone?"

"Not that," she told him. "I have a serving-maid only because she has been with the family for thirty years and if she did not live with me she would starve. She speaks not a word of English and she is terrified of the streets. I pay her no wages and I am sometimes very unhappy about her as well as myself. She is the only thing that loves me in my life, and she is the only person except Sister Georgina at the convent whom I love."

"You will soon make friends here," he assured her. "They told me at the Germanic the other night that you were filling the place for them."

"I am very glad," she said, replacing the little mirror she had been using in her very worn vanity case and closing the latter with a snap. "I thought that they did not very much like me. The people applaud and they all send wine to the musicians and to me, but because I cannot drink unless I eat, I refuse, and Monsieur Berthou, the leader of the orchestra, he does not approve. I think this is the best food I have had to eat or wine to drink," she went on, "since I have been in England...Tell me about Mr. Beverley. He has such a pleasant face but he was not very kind to me this morning."

"He is rather a rough diamond, anyway," Portington observed. "Thoroughly decent chap—good family, makes heaps of money, fine sportsman and all that—but not much of a ladies' man, I should think. Never so surprised in my life as when he told me he wanted to marry my daughter."

She looked at him in astonishment.

"He is the fiancé of your daughter?" she exclaimed.

Portington nodded.

"They've been engaged for nearly a year now. Neither of them seems to be in any hurry to get married."

Marya was silent for several moments.

"Is she very beautiful, your daughter?" she asked at last with apparent irrelevance.

"The illustrated papers always say so," he replied. "She is good-looking, I suppose. Nigel isn't a bad-looking fellow himself, if only he would look at life more kindly."

"I do not like him," she declared a little sadly. "And he does not like me. I think perhaps I said things wrongly. It is difficult to explain in a foreign language."

"That reminds me," Portington said. "You had not finished all that you wished to say."

She nodded.

"Of course," she admitted, "I do not understand business. It is quite strange to me. Does everyone treat everyone else as though they never spoke the truth?"

"I would not go so far as that," he answered, "but you must remember that you started off by confessing that your brother was in prison for theft."

"That is true," she acknowledged, "and because it was true I was not ashamed of it. One cannot live without money. Poor Rudolph, he is very often hungry and he did want the money so badly for those few shares. He did want to be at the meeting to-day."

"But what good would that have done him?"

"What good? Ah, but then," she went on, tapping the table with her very delicately-shaped forefinger, "I do not say things properly. It was not that he wanted to be unpleasant. He wanted to show Mr. Beverley his shares and to say to him: 'If you do not buy these from me and give me a great deal of money for them, I will tell your shareholders what I know about there being bauxite somewhere else in Orlac. It does not all belong to your mine as you told the newspaper man.'"

"I see," Lord Portington murmured. "Blackmail."

She smiled happily.

"Very likely that is the word," she admitted. "What my brother wished was that Mr. Beverley should give him a great deal of money for not telling the people what he knew. Is that blackmail?"

Portington concealed a smile behind his napkin.

"Something of the sort," he acknowledged.

"Well, that was what was in his mind," she said. "Now I must write to tell him that Mr. Beverley does not wish to buy his shares and that he does not believe his story. After that I suppose we shall write to the Germans."

Her companion looked up a little startled.

"Oh, there are some Germans in this, are there?" he asked.

"Of course there are," she told him. "I was coming to that if Mr. Beverley would have given me time to tell my story. There is a man called Treyer. If the King had not disliked him so much he would have given him the concession that he gave to Mr. Beverley, and your mine at Klast would have belonged to him. Now I am to let Mr. Treyer know that there is more bauxite in Orlac and I suppose he will try to buy that instead."

"Why not sell it to us?" Portington asked.

She leaned a little forward in her chair.

"I believe that was my brother's idea," she confided. "It is all very unfortunate, you see. Mr. Beverley disliked me so much that he did not even come after the meeting to hear what I had to say."

"But he sent me instead," her companion reminded her. "I am a director of the company."

"He should have come himself," she decided. "He had no faith in me. He would not believe me."

"But my dear young lady," Portington remonstrated, "you should consider this. The present company has spent thousands of pounds in having the country surveyed. The finest metallurgists and geologists in Europe have been over the place in sections and we have their signed report that nowhere else in the kingdom of Orlac are there any traces of the existence of bauxite."

"Then your men of science were all wrong," she said indignantly. "My brother knows. I think that I myself shall go to Nicolas, the King, and ask him if he will give permission to Mr. Treyer to dig for bauxite in the place where the piece in my bag was found."

"And ruin our company."

"Is Mr. Beverley the sort of man who cares whether he ruins others when he does business?" she demanded. "I do not think so."

"I have heard of this Mr. Treyer," Portington said thoughtfully. "Shifty devil they call him and as stingy as they make 'em."

"Do forgive," she begged, "I do not understand."

"He would grab the concession in his own name and you would get nothing for it. You know nothing of business. How could you deal with it—a little musician who can barely speak our language, as beautiful as an angel, a stranger in the country! How could you hold your own against Treyer?"

She reopened her vanity case and looked in the mirror speculatively.

"You think that I am beautiful, or is it that you just say foolish things?" she asked.

"On my honour I do think so. I never flatter."

"And attractive?"

"Devastatingly," he assured her.

She frowned.

"Why do you use words you know I shall not understand?" she complained. "If I am attractive, why did your Mr. Beverley not look at me twice? Why did he hurry me out of the place? Why did he not wish to see me again?"

"Perhaps because he is one of those unfortunate Englishmen," Portington suggested, "who can only see one woman at a time. I am rather like that myself."

"You mean that he thinks of no one but your daughter? Well then, he had better think a little of me. I do not like men who look at me as he did...I do not like men who look at me the other way, either," she added, with a faint tinge of reproof in her tone.

"It seems to me that you are a little difficult to please, anyway," he observed peevishly.

"How clever of you," she murmured. "Let us not talk much more. It is noisy here. Everyone seems so interested in life and one another and they all have so much to talk about. I am lonely and I am disappointed."

"Too bad," he murmured sympathetically.

He patted her hand. She withdrew her fingers quite slowly, with even a graceful little gesture, but there was something quite definite in their removal. Lord Portington had had a great deal of experience, however, of shy young ladies, and he was not easily discouraged.

"You want cheering-up," he suggested. "I think I must take you shopping after lunch."

"Shopping?" she repeated. "What is that?"

"Take you to the big establishments here where they sell pretty things—say frocks, hats, jewellery."

"I have no money," she sighed.

"You would not need any," he assured her.

"You mean that they would give me the things I admired?"

"Not exactly," he smiled. "Someone would pay, of course."

"You mean that you would?"

"Naturally."

She shook her head.

"I should not like that," she objected coldly.

"Why not?"

"You are not my father or my brother or any sort of relative," she said, looking at him steadily. "I meet you in a business office this morning. You are a stranger. Why should you give me presents?"

"Because I like you," he answered. "Because I have money and you have not."

"It is not a good reason, that," she objected. "You cannot like me very much. One gives presents because one is very generous or because—one loves somebody. I do not think there is any love in your heart for me."

"That might very easily come," he told her, leaning across the table impressively.

She shook her head again.

"Some day you would expect to be paid," she said. "You see, there is no way in which I could pay you."

She dabbled her fingers for a moment in the rose-scented bowl which the waiter had placed before her, glanced at a worn silver watch and pushed back her chair.

"Do you mind," she asked, "if we go? I must think a little and rest a little before I begin work this evening."

"And what about this fellow Treyer?" Portington asked as he summoned the waiter and paid the bill.

"I may write to him," she replied, "or I may write to the King. They say that he is in Paris."

"The place where your fragment of rock came from may not be on Crown Lands," he reminded her.

"That I know nothing about," she admitted. "If I write to the King, however, he will help to get Rudolph out of prison. That would be better, I think."

"You will let me drive you home, at any rate," he begged as they left the restaurant.

"That would be very kind of you," she consented gratefully. "I know the way from Chelsea to the Germanic. Nowhere else. I lose myself and people are not polite."

A woman with a flower-basket accosted them as they stood upon the pavement waiting for the car. Marya gave a little cry of delight.

"If you please," she implored, looking up at her companion, "instead of taking me shopping, will you give me that bunch of daffodils and a bunch of violets, too? That would give me great pleasure."

"Why, of course."

He filled her arms with the blossoms and left the flower-seller almost speechless with surprise and gratitude.

"That was the greatest kindness which anyone has offered me since I left Orlac," Marya said. "I have not smelt a flower since I left home. Thank you very much. If you are really driving me home it is Number 114, Chappell Court, Chappell Street, Chelsea. I have it written down here."

He handed her into the car and they drove off together. The girl's whole attention seemed to be taken up by her flowers.

"Look here," Portington began. "We can't part like this, Princess."

She raised her face from the cool caress of the flowers. Her beautiful eyes were once more cold.

"Why not?"

"The matter of the bauxite," he explained hastily. "I have been thinking it over, and in the interests of our company the affair had better be cleared up."

"I think," she decided, "that I shall write to Mr. Treyer."

"You will do nothing of the sort," he insisted. "Supposing I fetch you, will you come down and see us tomorrow?"

She shook her head.

"I have been to your office once," she said. "I have done, or tried to do, what my brother wished. Mr. Beverley was not polite to me. He did not believe that I was honest. I could see it in his eyes. Very well, I go somewhere else."

"It was only Nigel's manner," he assured her. "It would do us a great deal of harm if anyone suspected a German had got a second concession in Orlac and it turned out that there was really bauxite there. Please do as I suggest."

She considered the matter for a moment. A whiff of perfume from the violets seemed suddenly to attract her. She stooped down to smell them. When she looked up, the queer little suggestion of anger had left her expression. It was the face of a child again.

"You know my address for letters," she said. "You know where I am to be found in the evening. If Mr. Beverley wishes to see me he can do so. Thank you very much for the lunch, Lord Portington," she added as the car came to a standstill, "and with all my heart I thank you for the flowers. They will keep me happy for days."

She stepped lightly on to the pavement, hugging the two nosegays, and took leave of him with a foreign but not ungracious nod. Portington waved his hand, replaced his hat upon his head, and resumed his seat in the car with a grimace. He was by no means an inexperienced boulevardier, but the ways of this little lady from Orlac were strange to him.

CHAPTER III

There were times when Nigel Beverley, even-tempered man though he was, found his prospective father-in-law a distinct nuisance. As a frivoler in life he was an easy and pleasant companion. Directly he took himself seriously, however, he became troublesome. He was very serious indeed when Beverley returned to his office late that afternoon and heard with surprise that Lord Portington had been waiting for him for nearly an hour,

"I am terribly sorry," Beverley apologised. "If I had had any idea that you were coming back, I'd have left word where I was. Is it the little violinist who is still on your conscience?"

Portington had worked himself into a state of great solemnity. He hitched up his trousers and leaned across the desk.

"My dear Nigel," he began, "you are taking this matter much too lightly. I will admit that our luncheon started upon a more frivolous note but since then I have had a long conversation with the young lady and she has convinced me of two things."

Beverley rose from his usual seat at his desk and threw himself into a luxurious easy chair.

"She was not here for long," he remarked, "but she certainly had a convincing way with her."

"She is to be taken seriously," Portington declared. "I believe her story."

"Brother in prison and all that sort of thing?" Beverley queried.

"I believe that every word she said was the truth. I believe that bauxite is to be discovered in another part of the country. I believe that her brother has found out about it, and that there is serious danger of his approaching one of these German fellows on the matter."

"Disastrous, if it is true," Beverley admitted.

"I have had an interview with Mr. Patterson, our lawyer," Portington continued. "I am only a junior director of the company, of course, but upon the strength of what the young lady told me I felt it to be my duty. I have examined a copy of the charter, Nigel. It is as I supposed. The concession refers only to the mine at Klast. If any other deposit of bauxite has been discovered in the kingdom, it does not come within the scope of our activities. The Government of the country or the King himself, if the bauxite is upon Crown Lands, could grant another concession, and down would go the price and another country, possibly an enemy one, would be able to turn out the same stuff."

"Well, what do you propose that we do about it?" Beverley enquired, tapping a cigarette and lighting it. "By the by, I wonder if you would like a drink, sir? I am thinking of one myself. I have had rather a strenuous afternoon."

"A whisky-and-soda," Lord Portington admitted, "would be most acceptable."

Beverley unlocked a beautiful mahogany wine chest, produced a decanter of whisky and siphon of soda water, and served his guest and himself. They nodded to one another and Beverley took what was for him an unusually long gulp.

"You ask me," Portington continued, "what action I suggest that we should take. I think, to begin with, Nigel, you should realise the seriousness of this matter. You should get it into your head that this girl, although she is naturally at a loss with our language, is thoroughly straightforward instead of being the little fly-by-night piece I thought she was myself. We should decide upon a course of action at once."

"I am willing to presume that she was telling the truth straight away," Beverley agreed. "Now what about that plan of action?"

"Well, I think, whether he is in prison or not, we ought to get in touch with the brother," Portington suggested.

"Capital! And then?"

"I think we should approach either the Prime Minister of the country or the King. We should sound them as regards a further concession, if bauxite is found in any other part of the kingdom."

"You ought to be permanently in the City," Beverley observed.

"Just common sense, all this, my boy," Portington pointed out with a pleased smile. "Nothing but sheer common sense. We are making a large profit, I know, with this bauxite, but that is because the supply is so limited. If there is another lot coming onto the market and new competition to face, what will become of those profits? What will become, too, of the advantage we gain over any other country by having the control of this material?"

"That is the question," Beverley agreed. "Well now, tell me how you got on with the young lady."

Portington for a moment lost his air of extreme confidence and his tone became a little dubious.

"I had an exceedingly pleasant time, Nigel," he said. "I found the girl intelligent but remarkably stand-offish. She seemed very much hurt indeed at her reception here. She appears to have a personal grievance against you, and I'm afraid that she will take any opportunity that comes her way of getting her own back."

"In other words," Beverley suggested, "you think that she's not likely to help us in this matter if it turns out to be serious?"

"She's much more likely," Portington declared impressively, "to enter into negotiations with this fellow Treyer. You know what that will mean, Nigel. Not only shall we lose our monopoly, but we shall lose it to Germany."

Beverley, who was at all times a very moderate drinker, replenished his glass. He glanced across at Portington but shook his head.

"To prove to you, sir, how thoroughly I am in accord with you," he began, "I will tell you how I have spent my afternoon. I, too, have been to the lawyers. I have read over the charter and taken counsel's opinion upon a portion of it. I have ascertained the exact whereabouts of His Majesty King Nicolas and where he is likely to be for the next few days. I have wired to Klast, to our Consul there, to ascertain whether Mauranesco is still in prison, what is the length of his sentence and whether there is any truth in these rumours of a political upheaval in the country. I have ordered a plane to be ready for me at eight o'clock tomorrow and I have already telegraphed to Will Hayter, the assistant engineer at the mine, whom we have used once or twice before as a confidential inquiry-man out at Klast, and begged him to let me know the exact position of affairs. You see, sir, how right you are. I am admitting it and doing my best to make amends."

"There is just one thing you have not done which you will have to do," Portington told him. "You will have to make friends with the girl."

Beverley was silent for a moment or two. His eyes had wandered to the empty chair in which she had sat. He chased away a somewhat disturbing memory.

"My dear beau-pere-that-is-to-be," he expostulated, "do you think that it is seemly on my part to be chasing a lady of her youth, beauty and poverty, bearing in mind the fact that I am an engaged man?"

"Ursula is very sensible," her father reminded him. "You will have me on your side. I shall be able to explain."

"That's all very well," Beverley objected, "but I have not the gift for this sort of thing which you have. I never was a gay dog with the other sex, you know. A slow starter and never a finalist."

"You have got to get your nose down to it this time, my boy," Portington persisted. "I tell you frankly, I can't make any headway myself. The little devil even refused a shopping expedition. I have paved the way for you all right, though. She confessed that she was anxious to see you again. That's something, anyway."

"Perhaps so," Beverley assented. "What am I to do? Ring her up somewhere, call at her rooms? Shall I—"

"Nothing of that sort," Portington interrupted. "The poor child is living in the utmost poverty. I'll swear she hasn't a telephone. She has one room, a bed sitting-room I suppose, on the top floor of a newly erected block of flats in Chelsea. I don't believe she'd receive you there if you went."

"Tell me how you suggest that I approach her, then? I'm perfectly willing, up to a certain point."

"Well, I have discovered for one thing," Lord Portington confided, "that you are off duty to-night. Ursula is dining and going on to a committee meeting at the Copleys'. I believe that you are supposed to fetch her afterwards, but that would be considerably later."

"Quite true," Beverley agreed. "And so?"

"We don't want to advertise ourselves too much," Portington went on, "and I shall only accompany you in order to give the affair a start-off. The young lady will be more outspoken if I am not there. Besides—er—my presence would naturally cramp your style. I propose that you and I dine together quietly in the Grill at the Germanic, and that during the interval you do your best to get on terms with the girl."

There was a distinct frown, indicated by the contraction of his very fine eyebrows, upon Beverley's face.

"Rather vague," he commented.

"Any sort of terms; what's it matter? You and I are men of the world. She can't do the company much harm between now and ten o'clock, and when you do get a chance to talk to her it is up to you to convince her that we are the Johnnies to keep in with."

"I don't fancy," Beverley commented, "that Ursula would altogether approve."

"She's got to approve," the young lady's father said firmly. "Fifty per cent dividend on hoisting that infernal mineral out of the earth is making life a different thing for me. Don't you worry about Ursula. Leave it to me. You could start by making it entirely a matter of business with the girl. If you can't succeed that way you must take a chance."

"A trifle modern, aren't you, in the way of prospective fathers-in-law?" Beverley grunted.

"Never you mind about that, my lad," was the prompt retort. "It is you who got us into this hole by putting the girl's back up. You will have to set the matter right at any cost. I have shown you the way and I will give you a start-off, Nigel. I can't say fairer than that."

Beverley frowned doubtfully. Again he was glancing at that empty chair and seeing visions.

"I suppose not," he acquiesced.

"Of course if she had been one of the ordinary sort," Portington conceded, "it would not have been your job at all. I might have figured in your expense account rather heavily but I would have got the concession. As it is, the world is full of fascinating young women nowadays but there's only one other bauxite mine!"

Beverley rose from his chair and walked the length of the office and back again. His pleasant expression and debonair carriage had almost completely disappeared. His hands were deep in his trousers' pockets. His lips were pursed for a whistle which never materialized. He came to a standstill upon the hearthrug and looked across at Portington.

"Listen," he said. "I will do my best. I must warn you of this much, though. If I find for any reason, probably for no reason you would ever understand, that I want to back out, I shall—and it will be for you to carry on."

Portington's fingers once more strayed to the neighbourhood of his upper lip.

"You have plenty of common sense, Nigel," he admitted. "I will say that. If you decide to pass the business back again to me, well, all I can say is that I, too, will do my best."

Beverley rang the bell.

"I have some letters to write," he confided a little shortly, "and I must have a few words with my head clerk. What time do we meet to-night?"

"Half-past eight at the Germanic grill," Lord Portington replied, accepting the hint and rising to his feet. "I should suggest dinner coats and black ties, and a cocktail at Black's *en route*."

"I will be there," Nigel Beverley promised.

CHAPTER IV

At nine o'clock that evening Nigel Beverley, seated at the most favoured table in the Germanic grill with Lord Portington, had decided that he was a mean dog. By a quarter-past nine he was sure of it. His companion was a little annoyed.

"For goodness' sake," Portington begged, "don't sit there looking like a thundercloud, Nigel. We have a perfect right to come here and the girl should accept it as a compliment that we wish to hear her play. Can't you manage to look as though you were enjoying yourself? Waiter," he added, "I'll change that wine order. Give us a bottle of Clicquot '21 instead of the claret."

"Very good, my lord," the man replied obsequiously.

"There appears to be a brief interval," Portington observed. "I shall pay my respects to the young lady."

He rose and crossed the room to where the orchestra was seated on a little raised dais. Beverley let him depart without a word. His eyes were still fixed upon that slim, girlish figure standing with her back to the piano. She was looking apparently in his direction but with unseeing eyes. Her costume had no kinship with the ordinary type of suburban evening gown affected by young ladies who play the violin in an orchestra. It was a perfectly plain black frock buttoned high up to her neck with scarcely a break in its continuous line. A little bow of white tulle at her throat was her only ornament. Her beautiful hair—he realised for the first time how beautiful, in its mellow golden softness—was brushed plainly back from what he saw now to be a serious as well as an attractive face. She was unduly pale, perhaps, but it was a pallor which carried with it its own distinction. Her deep-set hazel eyes were expressionless but it was because she was looking at nothing. The slight curve of her lips seemed almost childish, a trifle disdainful, too, at her forced appearance amongst that small but heterogeneous crowd of performers. Somehow, she gave him the feeling that he would like to leave his seat, fetch his coat and hat and walk away from the place. At the same time, he had another feeling—that nothing would induce him to leave until he had talked to her...

He had not long to wait. It was a quiet evening and the place was half full. The leader of the orchestra was only too happy to grant a request from a distinguished visitor. Portington brought the girl to their table and the waiter hurried to place a chair for her.

"There's ten minutes' interval," Portington announced, "and Mademoiselle Mauranesco—the Princess, I should say—is going to drink her first cocktail with us."

"Her first?" Beverley remarked, rising to his feet.

"But you don't know the young lady's age," the other observed. "She is eighteen and a half. She tells me, too, that in Orlac, where there are very few tourists and no one has any money to spend, such luxuries are unknown. I have suggested a White Lady."

"It is a surprise to see you again so soon," the girl remarked, looking a little shyly at Beverley across the table.

"We were anxious to hear you play," he told her, "and I am looking forward to making my apologies."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"You have little to apologise for," she said. "You were not very sympathetic and you had perhaps the air of not quite believing my story. I suppose it was the wrong thing for me to do, though, visiting you in your office. I am sorry."

"We will forget it, shall we?" he suggested. "I wanted to have an opportunity of telling you, Mademoiselle, that I was stupid and ill-mannered. That was because I was a little upset. We had an important meeting coming on and then what you told me, whether it was true or not, well, it was rather a blow, you know."

"We need not speak of it again," she said. "It is over. I like your cocktail," she added as she sipped from the glass which had been placed before her. "It is very good indeed, but a little stronger than our syrups and home-distilled vermouth. You are dining here—yes?"

"We have come to hear you play," Portington confided.

"And I to beg for your forgiveness," Beverley added.

She waved her hand, a subdued but graceful little gesture.

"It is finished," she said. "Never need we speak of it again."

"Are you going to sell us the five shares?" Portington asked.

She shook her head.

"Of course not," she replied. "I am sorry I spoke of that."

"Perhaps now that we have a chance you would like me to explain the whole situation," Beverley proposed.

"Please not," she begged. "I should not understand and already half of my ten minutes are gone. I am disappointed with this place. It is not even so gay as our cafes in Klast. The lights are not good. People all seem so morose. They eat all the time and they drink nothing. Perhaps that is why they are not gay."

"A matter of temperament, my dear young lady," her elder companion assured her. "It takes a great deal to make an Englishman gay. We take our pleasures, if not sadly, at least silently."

She took another sip from her glass, then, glancing at the platform, she rose to her feet.

"It is Monsieur Berthou who looks at me," she explained. "He wishes the music. I must return to my place. You will excuse, please? I thank you for the cocktail."

"Will you come back again?" Portington asked. "My friend here is very anxious to talk to you."

She looked at Beverley. It seemed to him that this was the first time their eyes had met. There was a faint note of enquiry in her gaze, a certain measure of doubt. He was suddenly conscious that a great deal might depend upon what he said. He had no time, however, to choose his words.

"It is quite true," he assured her. "I do wish to talk to you. I came to-night on purpose to see you."

"If it gives you pleasure," she said slowly, "I will return. It will not be until after ten o'clock. We have half-an-hour's rest then and supper if we choose to take it. If you wish, I shall come."

"I most certainly do wish and I shall be here waiting for you," he told her gravely.

Lord Portington smiled. He was very thankful indeed that Beverley was playing up.

"Let me take you back now," he begged.

"Thank you," she answered. "It is not necessary."

"It will be a pleasure," he murmured as he led her away.

"Is he very happy, your Mr. Beverley?" she asked as they crossed the floor side by side. "He is engaged to marry a very beautiful Indy, as I am sure your daughter must be. That should make him light-hearted and give him good spirits. He should live with a smile upon his lips."

"Perhaps to-night he is depressed," Portington said, leaning towards her confidentially. He had an inspiration.

"You see, what you told us about that little lump of rock you carried in your bag was rather a blow," he went on. "It may be, if your brother is right, that our company will lose a great deal of money."

"I believe," she sighed, "that it is money only in this country which makes people happy. That is why my companion, the old nurse who lives with me, does not like being in England. She says that in our own land the people think of music and of their food, their wine and of their love affairs. But of money they think seldom."

"Perhaps that is why they have so little," he pointed out. "Yours is a poor country, is it not?"

"One of the poorest in the world," she told him, "and yours, they tell me, is one of the richest. Yet I have seen more happiness in my own country than I have here. It is strange ... I thank you. Lord Portington."

"When you come back," he said, "I shall have gone. Please be kind to our friend."

"I will play him something gay before the evening is over," she promised. "I will play him something which will remind him of the sunshine, and dancing, and pleasant people."

"It would do him a lot of good," her escort remarked as he turned away with a farewell bow.

Portington resumed his seat with the air of one who faces a problem.

"Nigel," he confided, "I cannot make that young woman out."

"Is she so difficult?"

"Of course her age may be the explanation," Portington meditated. "She gives one the impression of such delightful simplicity, yet when we reflect that she sat there and told us about her brother's being in prison and apparently thought nothing of it, one is puzzled. Perhaps she really does take it as lightly as she seems to."

"That is a possibility," Beverley admitted.

The music recommenced. The two men paused between the courses of their dinner to listen and watch the girl. The music was of the Hungarian type—full of staccato notes, light-footed, with breathless, tremulous spells. Then suddenly the girl was playing, alone, a few queer tremulous notes carrying the rhythm and melody into another phase altogether, and yet preserving by subtle little touches the motif of the composer. Neither of her two auditors were musicians but Beverley was nearer to realising the beauty of Marya's touch and the faultlessness of the notes she produced. His companion, however, was the first to lead the applause.

"The girl can play, damn it!" he exclaimed. "Jove, she'd be worth backing if one were years younger, and if she's really the ingenue she seems to be. She's good, Nigel. I tell you, she's really good. She's wasted in an orchestra like this. I don't see why we shouldn't have her play at one of Ursula's At Homes. You must talk to her about it."

"I wonder," Beverley speculated.

"Of course," Portington went on as he lit a cigarette a little later, "for all your alert bearing, you are one of those staid sort of fellows, Nigel. You would never lose your head about anyone. Wish to heaven I was like you! Even at my time of life I tell you frankly that girl makes me feel—well, almost a young man again. And I can't imagine why. Everything that she says and does, the very way she looks at you, is either a denial or a complete ignoring of sex. Until I knew how young she was she puzzled me enormously."

Beverley declined to be drawn into a discussion. He opened the evening newspaper for which he had sent.

"I suppose," he said drily, "she really is a product of her sheltered life and an undeveloped temperament."

Portington smoked gloomily for several minutes. For a boon companion he sometimes found this young man who was proposing to enter his family a trifle unsympathetic. It was true that the girl was not playing for the moment, but Beverley's sudden absorption in his newspaper was almost unnatural.

"What's that you are studying so intently?" he asked.

"I beg your pardon," Beverley apologised, throwing down the paper. "It is just an account of our meeting this afternoon. I wanted to be sure no gossip had got about. That man who writes the City articles—he's pretty clever at handling this sort of thing."

"Is my speech there?" Portington asked with interest.

His companion coughed.

"Only a brief account, sir. Just remarks that Lord Portington, in a few apt words, proposed the usual vote of thanks to the chairman and officials."

"A couple of very neat little touches of mine wasted," Portington grumbled.

"Nobody ever reports speeches at these company meetings," Beverley reminded him. "There's only one sort of thing to be said and only one way of saying it."

Portington glanced at the other's plate.

"You have eaten nothing, Nigel," he remarked. "What's the matter with you?"

"Saving myself," was the quiet reply. "I shall try and persuade the young lady to have some supper or something when the break comes. I thought I had better hold off so as to be able to join her."

Lord Portington beamed approval.

"Capital!" he exclaimed. "That's just what I should have done myself. I think, if you don't mind, I will be getting on. I'd like to look in at the club for half an hour, and afterwards this charity affair might be amusing. Sort of superior bottle party, I imagine. You stick to it, Nigel," he went on earnestly. "I'd stay if I thought I could do any good, but it's much better left entirely in your hands. My respects to the young lady. Telephone me how things have gone and what your plans are, either late to-night or tomorrow morning."

Beverley's farewell was a trifle indefinite. He was conscious at that moment of only one overpowering desire. He wanted to get rid of his prospective father-in-law. He wanted him to leave the place and stay away. Portington, sublimely unconscious of the fact, murmured a few more words and took his departure, more than ever convinced of his gifts as a diplomat.

CHAPTER V

At a few minutes past ten the music stopped and Beverley rose to his feet with unconscious eagerness. He had scarcely taken a step from his chair, however, before he paused. A man who had been seated at an opposite table had anticipated him and intercepted Marya's approach. They stood together talking in the centre of the place. He pointed to his table. The girl shook her head but continued the conversation. Beverley eyed her companion, who was certainly not an attractive personality, with something approaching disgust. He was a tall, thin man of indefinite age, with rather prominent teeth, a pallid complexion and eyes set very near together. He was in formal evening dress, but his clothes were ill-fitting and he was apparently greatly disturbed. He held in his hand thick-lensed spectacles which he had removed upon addressing Marya. Finally she turned away from him. He made a movement as though to

clutch her arm. At the last moment, however, he lost his courage. He returned unwillingly to his table and she made her way towards Beverley, who was standing prepared to greet her.

"I have not made you wait?" she asked.

"Not at all," he answered. "I see that you have found a friend."

"That was not a friend," she confided. "It is my brother whom he knows. That was Mr. Treyer. He was at your meeting this afternoon. He is a German who knows all about bauxite."

"Rat!" Beverley muttered.

"You do not like him?" she queried. "My brother thinks he is a nice man."

The waiter held her chair and Beverley seated himself opposite to her.

"What was he doing at the meeting?" he demanded.

"He did not exactly tell me," she replied, "but I think that it is quite easy to know. He is wondering whether you have heard of my brother's discovery. He was very anxious to hear if you and I were going to talk about bauxite."

"Does he know who I am?"

"Oh yes, he knows very well who you are. That is why he was so disturbed. He did not like it that I come and talk with you. I tell him what has happened to my brother and he was angry. He thought that Rudolph was working for him."

The waiter approached the table with dishes.

"You have a very light supper," Beverley warned her. "Quails and a little asparagus. I did not care for my chicken—I was not hungry then. Now that you have come I have found my appetite. I shall join you, if I may."

"It is very good manners of you," she acknowledged, "that you will not let me eat alone. You have chosen just what I like. I am hungry. May I drink some wine?"

The waiter filled their glasses. Beverley said nothing for several moments. He found it a difficult situation.

"You do not talk much," she remarked.

"It is because I have too much to say," he answered. "Now that you have noticed it I shall begin. First of all, then, it is understood that I apologise most heartily for my rudeness this morning."

"That is forgotten."

"I am very interested in that piece of rock which you have brought over to England and which you say that your brother found somewhere in Orlac. I should like to know exactly where it came from. I have telegraphed my expert there to make further investigations immediately."

"You have changed your mind, then," she said. "You do believe me now. It is a little late."

"What do you mean by a little late?"

"I have sent a letter to my brother. I have told him that you think the piece of rock is a cheat. I wrote to Mr. Treyer. That is why he is here to-night. It was what my brother had told me."

"You didn't give me much time to change my mind, did you?" he remarked.

"You did seem to me," she replied, "like a man who would be very unlikely to change his mind."

"So that long boulder to whom you were talking just now is Mr. Treyer, the German agent?"

"It is a difficult language, English," she sighed. "'Boulder' is a word I do not understand. It was Mr. Treyer with whom I was speaking. He came here purposely to see me."

Beverley glanced across the room to where the solitary man was glowering at them.

"If you will take my advice," he said earnestly, "you will have nothing to do with Mr. Treyer. He will cheat you if he can. I am sure of it."

She looked at him for a moment steadfastly out of the unfathomable depths of her deep hazel eyes.

"You mean that if I tell him where my brother found this piece of rock he will buy the land and then he will not pay us anything?"

"Something like that."

"And with you it would be different? You and Lord Portington would be honest? You would pay all that you promised?"

"Precisely," he admitted. "That is the difference between my company and Treyer. We should pay. He would not. We are honest. He is a rogue."

"The quail," she said with apparent irrelevance, "is good. I enjoy him."

"Delighted," he murmured, filling her glass.

"But Mr. Treyer is very angry," she went on. "He looked as though he was going to bite me. He invited me to have supper with him. He has pencil and paper in his pocket. He would like me to sketch the place where my brother found this little piece of rock and put in the name."

"You can't do that," he told her.

"Why can I not?"

"Because if you make that sketch at all you will make it on the back of this menu card and write the name of the place where it was found."

"You will give me money if I do that?"

"A great deal," he assured her. "Much more than that piece of rock is worth, probably."

"You have changed your mind, then? You trust me now?"

"I would not put it like that," he complained. "I had no time to decide in the office. Since then I have made up my mind. I believe your story."

"All this," she confessed as she ate her quail and sipped her wine delicately, "is very interesting."

"Is it true what Lord Portington told me, that you are only eighteen and a half?"

She looked at him curiously. Beverley's features were excellent, even if his chin indicated a certain measure of pugnacity. His blue eyes were pleasantly clear and lit occasionally by a gleam of humour. His mouth was resolute but not emotional. It was, on the whole, an attractive countenance.

"It is quite true," she replied. "Why do you ask me? Is it of interest?"

"Distinctly."

"Why?"

"Because you are far too young to be playing in a restaurant orchestra, to be entrusted with a dangerous and important secret, and to be wandering about in a strange city by yourself."

"It is not the affair of others what I do," she said coldly.

"It is the affair of anyone who takes an interest in you," he rejoined.

"Do you take an interest in me?" she asked, looking across the table at him.

He hesitated for a moment. There was not a shred of coquetry or provocativeness in the question. There was very little curiosity.

"I did not when I first saw you," he confessed. "I do now."

"I wonder," she murmured. "I am not beautiful. I play the violin in a queer fashion of my own, perhaps. Or is it that that fragment of rock and its history mean so much to you?"

"It certainly is not the streak of bauxite in your fragment of rock," he assured her. "Many things would have to happen before that could become of vital importance to us. The claim to the land with instructions where it was found would have to be proved. Concessions would have to be arranged, machinery for the mine would have to be obtained. You have only Mr. Treyer and myself who might be interested and I am perfectly certain that you would not trust Mr. Treyer."

"You are quite wrong in what you say," she assured him. "Besides yourself and Mr. Treyer there is also Predor Pravadia."

"Who is the person with that extraordinary name?" he asked.

"He is the leader of the communist party in Orlac."

"I don't like his name," Beverley observed.

She shrugged her shoulders slightly.

"He was born with it. His father was what you call in English a 'blacksmith.'"

"If you thought he could do anything about it why did you not see him before you left your country?"

"Because," she admitted calmly, "he refused to see me. He thought, I suppose, that I had come to beg. The last members of my family were always begging from the Government. Then, you see, there was my brother in prison. He might have thought that I came to beg for his release. It was not interesting for him to see me."

"What about Lavaroko? I thought that he was the head of your Government when you left Orlac."

"He was," she acknowledged, "but he was what you call a 'falling star.' He had lost the confidence of the people. He could have done nothing. Of course there is the King," she continued doubtfully. "I could have gone direct to him."

"And why didn't you?"

She helped herself to asparagus and *beurre fondu* which the *maitre d'hôtel* was tendering, and watched while her glass was refilled. It was quite an appreciable period of time before she replied.

"That," she said, "does not concern you. The King is in Paris. I could have gone there, but I came to you instead. And now please ask me no more questions. You annoy me with so many. What I choose to tell, I tell. It is myself who decides."

"For a young lady of eighteen and a half years you have a will of your own," he observed.

Her eyebrows, very attractive and silky upon her pearly skin, were gently raised.

"My age, also," she reminded him, "is my own affair."

"You are very independent," he said smiling.

"It is not I who am independent," she rejoined. "It is you who ask too many questions. I know that I have seen very little of the world," she went on gravely. "Perhaps for that reason I think the more. You are not very old yourself. If it were Lord Portington, for instance, I would not dare to say so much. But it would seem to me that when you think of yourself you think of yourself as the most important thing in the world. Other people only interest you so far as they can help or keep you back. You are honest," she continued, after a moment's reflection. "It is, I should think, your best quality. I could tell directly I came into your office that you did not like me. I could tell just now, directly you looked across the room when I was talking to Mr. Treyer, that you did not like him."

He smiled.

"Who could possibly like a fellow like Treyer?"

"Why not?" she enquired. "He likes me. He tells me so already."

"Infernal cheek!"

"What does that mean?" she asked, puzzled.

"Never mind. I will answer your question. Look at the fellow. Teeth sticking out—that always means something unpleasant; eyes looking into each other—that means cunning; he can't even sit still in his chair—that means lack of self-control. Not an atom of good taste about him, either, although he says he does like you. He comes to dine in the Grill Room in dress coat and white tie, and the coat itself is far too long for him—the sort of garment affected by the French gigolo! And the white tie I'd swear has seen service before. Oh, he's all wrong, believe me. Princess Marya of MauranESCO. You can't possibly sell your little piece of rock to him."

Almost for the first time he saw her smile. It was a gesture which never fully developed but which changed her whole expression. His reaction to it was prompt and spontaneous. A humorous light shone in his eyes, his mouth relaxed. He leaned a little towards her. Both, at that moment, were secretly conscious of the passing of that thin barrier of mutual antagonism.

"The poor man!" she murmured. "I did notice that his coat was funny. I like yours better and your red carnation is becoming."

The personal feeling in her harmless remark seemed to change the whole atmosphere. He drew his flower a little further into its place.

"Now that you have praised my small effort at adornment," he said, and all the stiffness had gone from his tone, "I can tell you how much I admire your own lack of it."

She glanced at her wrists and fingers.

"Jewellery I do not possess," she confided, "except some rings which were my grandmother's and which Sister Georgina keeps for me at the convent. If ever I marry I shall wear them. If I die they will be sold for the poor. It is a quaint thing," she went on, "that I like you much better now that you have smiled. It is quaint, too, that it should have been because of Mr. Treyer, because I do not think he likes you very much."

"Loathes me," he assured her. "He worked hard to get the concession that my company holds and they tell me that he is always hanging about the German Consulate at Klast. I suppose he thinks that if these European complications develop and Orlac takes sides, there may be a chance for him to make trouble."

"He warned me against you," she confided.

"Do not believe a word he said," Beverley begged, with a return of the twinkle in his eyes. "I'm really not so bad."

"It was not only you, it was your company. He said you were what he called 'sharks.' What does 'sharks' mean?"

"It means 'over-keen.' Practically dishonest," he explained.

"That is right. He told me that you got your concession that way."

This time Beverley's was a perfectly human grin.

"Envious old fox," he observed. "He tried to be too clever and we beat him at it."

"More words that I do not understand," she complained. "May I have some coffee, please? In ten minutes I must return."

"May I drive you home afterwards?" he suggested when he had given the order to a waiter.

She shook her head. He liked to think it was a slightly reluctant gesture.

"Please no," she begged. "My old nurse, Suka, who lives with me, always calls for me. It is best like that, please."

He was curiously disappointed but he recognised a certain inflexibility in her tone and manner which he made no attempt to combat.

"Very well," he agreed. "Will you give me your address? And within a week I will ask you to meet me. By that time I will give you a definite answer to send to your brother."

She scribbled on the piece of paper which he handed to her.

"You want my piece of rock?" she asked as she returned it.

He shook his head.

"I do not even ask you for the sketch, the little map of the place it was found," he replied. "All I would ask you is to keep away from that wretched fellow Treyer."

She laughed quietly as she rose to her feet.

"It will be very difficult. He is like a crazy man about my piece of rock."

"Don't trust him a yard," he begged, walking with her towards the dais.

"I think," she said quietly in a tone which was still emotionless but very soft and pleasant to listen to, "I shall believe nothing he says. I am beginning to feel more kindness about you. I will trust you, if you wish, with my piece of rock."

Again he shook his head.

"Keep it to yourself," he advised, as he turned away from the platform with a little bow of farewell.

Beverley, with those restless, unpleasant eyes watching him from the other side of the room, sent for his bill a few minutes after Marya had left him. Treyer did not hesitate for a moment. He crossed the floor and stood before Beverley's table. He spoke English fluently but with a thick guttural accent.

"I believe," he said, "you know who I am. You are Mr. Nigel Beverley of the Klast Mine?"

"I am," Beverley acknowledged.

"With your permission I will join you for a short time."

"I regret very much but I am on the point of leaving," was the cool reply.

"It is a matter of business which I wish to discuss with you," Treyer insisted doggedly.

"It must be another time, then, if at all. I am quite unaware of there being any business which we could discuss."

Mr. Treyer drew himself up to his full height, which was very considerable, for he was a long and lanky person. He withdrew his glasses, blinked for a moment and continued.

"I wish to know what steps you are taking," he said, "with reference to this new discovery of bauxite in Orlac."

"Has there been any discovery?" Beverley enquired.

"The young man Mauranesco," Treyer went on, "the brother of the girl who is playing in the orchestra here, claims to have found distinct traces of it in the northern part of the kingdom. You probably know that as well as I do. It is a matter of serious importance to you."

Beverley paused for a moment while he received change from the waiter and handed him his very munificent gratuity.

"I have heard something about it," he admitted. "I cannot see, however, that we have any mutual interests in the matter."

Mr. Treyer was evidently becoming angry and it did not improve his appearance.

"What you say is foolish," he declared. "You know quite well that your interests will be seriously affected."

"You speak as though you were aware of the terms of the royal concession and the charter to my company," Beverley observed.

"I am," was the harsh reply, "and I know very well that if bauxite is found in any other part of the country it will not come under your charter and it will bring the price down fifty per cent. I was at the meeting to-day. Patting yourselves nicely on the back, were you not, about that concession out of which you cheated me? Something like five hundred thousand pounds' profit on the first year's working. You will have to halve that, Mr. Beverley, if Rudolph Mauranesco's discovery is a genuine one."

"Maybe," Beverley admitted. "On the other hand, I scarcely see that it is a matter of profitable discussion between you and me."

"I will point out why we should discuss it," Mr. Treyer rejoined with a little snort. "I will sit down for a few minutes."

"Just as you please," Beverley replied. "The table is at your disposal. I myself am just leaving."

There was a moment's silence. Treyer was struggling with his obvious irritation. Beverley was fastening up his pocket-book.

"So that is to be your attitude?" Treyer demanded harshly.

"Did you expect anything else?" was the curt retort. "You fought us hard to obtain a share in the concession we are holding. We declined negotiations with you then and your offer to help finance the business. We are in the same position to-day. That's all I have to say to you, Mr. Treyer."

"Sit down for a few minutes," the latter urged. "I have a suggestion to make."

Beverley shook his head.

"If you wish to sit here pray occupy my table," he begged. "I am leaving now."

He nodded to the waiter, spoke a gracious word of farewell to the *maitre d'hôtel* who was hovering by, and left the place without another glance at Treyer. The latter stood quite still for several moments watching his departure. His lips seemed to have receded still more. There was an unpleasant light in his eyes as he returned to his table, his hands behind his back, his stoop more pronounced than ever.

CHAPTER VI

A DARK, olive-complexioned young man, good-looking but with a somewhat fatigued expression, turned from the window of the sitting room where he had been gazing over the Place Vendome to greet the visitor whom his servant was announcing. He wore tweeds which were obviously of English extraction. He was exceedingly well turned out and he possessed an air of distinction. His attitude was friendly but guarded.

"It is Mr. Nigel Beverley, I am sure," he said, holding out his hand.

Beverley drew himself up and bowed before he advanced and accepted the salutation.

"It is very kind of Your Majesty to remember me."

"Not at all, not at all," was the genial reply. "Sit down, please. My secretary has, I trust, informed you of the condition I made when consenting to receive you."

"Certainly, sir," Beverley acquiesced. "I shall obey your wishes strictly. So far as I am concerned your incognito shall be rigidly preserved."

"I am entered in the hotel books here as 'Mr. Nicolas,'" he said. "An occasional 'sir' I do not mind, but here in Paris Mr. Nicolas is my name."

"You may rely upon my discretion," Beverley assured him.

The young man passed his cigarette case.

"I have the ill fortune," he confided, "to rule over a thankless people. They do not understand that even a king needs relaxation. Orlac is a beautiful country, but to live in all the time—impossible. We have had very pleasant business connections, Mr. Beverley. What more can I do for you?"

"I have come to ask you for another concession," Beverley announced.

Nicolas smiled wistfully.

"But my dear friend," he said, "I have nothing else in Orlac except the palace itself worth tuppence. You hold already the concession for the bauxite mine."

"Quite true, sir," Beverley admitted, "but our concession was framed in the belief that the bauxite was to be found only in the particular district where the present mine is situated. Whether it be a true or false report I do not know yet, but I have had information that bauxite has been found in another part of your kingdom."

There was no doubt about the young man's interest. He waved his visitor, who was still standing, to a chair.

"Sit down, if you please, Mr. Beverley," he invited. "This is most interesting. Would you be so good, I wonder, as to ring the bell?"

Beverley did as he was requested.

"How did you obtain this information?" Nicolas continued. "Where is this bauxite? Is it on Crown Lands?"

"The information which has been handed to me," Beverley told him, "comes from the sister of a young man who I understand is in prison. His name is MauranESCO."

Nicolas shook his head.

"A bad lot, those MauranESCOs."

"I know nothing of the family," Beverley went on. "The sister of the young man has brought me a small fragment of rock which contains distinct traces of bauxite. Her brother refuses to set down on paper where it was found and his sister, I am convinced, does not know."

"And the young man is in prison?"

"So his sister tells me."

"Where is he confined?"

"In the city gaol at Klast."

"And the charge against him?"

"Stealing money from some tourists with whom he was travelling."

"What is his sentence?"

"It has another month to run."

Nicolas was thoughtful.

"Does anyone else know of this business?" he enquired.

"A German named Treyer," Beverley replied. "He endeavoured to obtain the concession you graciously granted to my firm."

"A most unpleasant person," Nicolas declared. "Stop! An idea comes to me."

The bell was at that moment answered.

"Send in my secretary at once," Nicolas ordered. "You will find him in the ante-room. Also send here a bottle of Pommery '28, a bottle of Scotch whisky and some soda water. Also ice."

The man bowed respectfully and departed. His place was taken almost immediately by a young man of mournful appearance dressed with great precision in sombre attire and wearing dark spectacles.

"My secretary, Baron Genetter, Mr. Beverley. You probably remember him."

The two men exchanged formal bows. Nicolas continued.

"Genetter," he said, "you had a letter the other day from a German who asked for an interview. It was forwarded from Orlac. You replied?"

"I replied at your suggestion, sir, enquiring into the nature of his business."

"Was there any further communication from him?"

"Yes, sir."

"You may speak before Mr. Beverley," Nicolas said shortly. "What did the fellow want?"

"He wrote at great length, sir," the secretary replied. "He declared that he had spent many months, on behalf of his Government, searching for bauxite in Orlac and the surrounding countries. He believes that he has been successful in finding traces of it in an utterly unsuspected portion of our country. Before he proceeds further he wishes for an open concession."

"This is very interesting," Nicolas murmured. "You heard that, Mr. Beverley? Very interesting."

"Without a doubt," Beverley agreed. "The only thing is, sir, I hope you won't deal with this fellow Treyer. He is not a nice person at all."

Nicolas coughed.

"That is possible," he admitted, "but frankly I agree with the old commercial saying: 'Business is business.' You do also, I am sure."

"Perfectly," Beverley replied, "with the right people. With the wrong people it may lead to disaster. Whilst your secretary is here, sir, may I in one or two words explain the suggestion I have come to make?"

"By all means," Nicolas acquiesced graciously. "That commits me to nothing."

"If the concession which you granted to my company, sir, had been drawn up in a grasping spirit, its conditions would have embraced bauxite in the Kingdom of Orlac wherever found, and this discovery would simply have made our own deal with you the more profitable. We asked for the concession,

however, only upon the Klast Mine, and the immediately surrounding country near the capital. I think, therefore, that I am not unreasonable when I ask now for an extended concession to include any bauxite found in any other part of the country."

Nicolas' eyebrows were faintly raised.

"That wants thinking over," he remarked. "What do you say, Genetter?"

"I should ask Mr. Beverley what his company is prepared to pay for the extended concession," was the discreet reply.

"Excellent," Nicolas approved with a happy smile. "Well thought of, Genetter. An extended concession—er—cannot be granted without consideration."

The waiter entered with wine in a cooler, a bottle of whisky, soda water and a further silver pail full of ice.

"I should like," Nicolas proposed, "to offer you some refreshment, Mr. Beverley."

"You are very kind, sir. I will take a whisky-and-soda, if I may."

Nicolas himself took a tumblerful of champagne. Beverley mixed his own drink. The waiter left the room. Nicolas leaned back in the easy chair, crossed his legs and lit a fresh cigarette. For a moment his expression was slightly spoilt by an avaricious gleam in those uncannily large eyes.

"I should like to put the matter to you in this way, sir," Beverley went on. "When you granted my company the present concession we only asked that it should apply to the small area of land round the then extinct Klast Mine."

"Just so," Nicolas agreed, "and that is all we granted."

"Very greatly to your financial benefit," Beverley remarked, "if it should turn out that Mauranesco's claim is a true one. I am here now to suggest that you give my company a further concession upon bauxite or any similar mineral discovered in any part of the country upon Crown Lands."

"This requires consideration," Nicolas declared.

"The Mauranesco find may not be on Crown Lands at all," Beverley reminded him. "In that case, sir, we should ask you to use your influence with the owners of the land and the Government to grant the concession to us. There's no other way in which it could be made profitable, as there is no machinery in the kingdom except ours, and no skilled labour."

Nicolas smoked his cigarette thoughtfully for a moment or two.

"How does that strike you, Genetter?" he asked the silent figure in the background.

"It would be interesting to know the first advance sum Mr. Beverley proposes to pay for the preliminary agreement if the Mauranesco discovery should prove to be genuine."

Beverley nodded.

"I will make you an offer at once," he agreed: "Provided you, sir, give a letter promising to use your influence with Parliament to grant us the concession on the same terms as the existing one, we should be willing to advance at once the sum of twenty-five thousand pounds."

"And supposing," Nicolas reflected, "that the Mauranesco reported find should turn out to be a mistake, or that my Government, say, refused to accept my advice as to how it should be disposed of?"

"In that case it would be open to Your Majesty to return us the twenty-five thousand pounds; or failing that we should lose the money."

"A speculation."

"Precisely—a speculation."

"I do not think," Nicolas said blandly, "that you would get the twenty-five thousand pounds back."

"It would be the fortune of war," Beverley acknowledged.

The door was suddenly thrown open. A young woman of exceedingly seductive appearance entered. She wore a beautifully tailored suit which had the unmistakable Parisian cachet; her hat, her coiffure, her fur and the small etceteras of her toilet were faultless. She made her way over to Nicolas, who had risen at once at her entrance.

"My dear Katarina!" he exclaimed with a slight note of remonstrance in his tone.

She stretched out her hands.

"I regret," she apologised. "When I found the Baron was not in his room I thought that you and he would be alone. I have been walking in the Bois and it was very tiresome. Do I disturb anything of importance?"

"It is business which we discuss," Nicolas admitted, "and it is business of an exceedingly interesting nature. Mr. Beverley, I have the pleasure to present you to Madame Katarina."

She nodded pleasantly. There was a flash of welcome in her dark eyes. She was flamboyant but magnificent. Beverley bowed and placed a chair for her. She seated herself, however, on the arm of Nicolas's fauteuil.

"In a way your arrival is opportune," the latter went on. "Tell me, Katarina, do you think we could find a use for twenty-five thousand pounds?"

She threw out her hands in ecstasy.

"Who is it that makes this glorious suggestion?" she exclaimed, speaking in French with a somewhat curious accent.

"It is I, Madame," Beverley replied. "I have made a proposition to His—to Mr. Nicolas."

"Twenty-five thousand!" she repeated. "Why, *mon petit*," she went on, caressing his arm, "it is the one thing we need to make us perfectly happy—a little more money. Twenty-five thousand pounds! Four million francs! It would mean another fortnight here in happiness. Who is this good angel, my beloved?"

"This gentleman owns the company who bought the concession of the Klast Mine," Nicolas told her.

"A rich Englishman!" she exclaimed with a glance at him which was almost a caress. "How I love them all! Monsieur Beverley, I agree...What I say, he does," she went on, patting her lover's arm. "What do we do to secure these twenty-five thousand pounds?"

"Very little," Nicolas admitted. "But we might have to give them back again if it turned out that a certain rumour was false."

"Oh, la la!" she cried scornfully. "Monsieur Beverley would take the risk about our paying it back. Money is so easily spent in Paris. One buys this and one buys that. The money is gone directly. How can one give it back? Monsieur Beverley is too generous, I am sure," she added with another wonderful flash of her eyes as she looked towards him, "to expect such a thing."

"Madame," Beverley rejoined with a little bow, "I look upon it as extraordinarily improbable that I should ever be put in the painful position of having to ask you for the return of this money we speak of."

She turned to Nicolas.

"I think I like your Englishman," she confided. "He is not so serious as most of them. He has what they call a twinkle in the eye. Monsieur Beverley, will you give me a glass of champagne?"

Beverley, with a glance towards Nicolas, who gave solemn assent, filled a glass and presented it to the lady. Her eyes, beautiful notwithstanding the obvious art of the specialist, again flashed wonderful things into his.

"You drink, too," she insisted. "We make a toast."

"We three," she added, as though suddenly remembering Nicolas.

Beverley raised his tumbler courteously and backed a few steps away.

"To the money which will arrive," Katarina declared, lifting her glass. "To the happiness it will bring. To that emerald pendant which reposes still in the establishment of Cartier. That is a good toast. Monsieur, is it not?"

Beverley drank discreetly. Nicolas whispered something to Katarina. She pulled his ear and laughed softly.

"Might I suggest, sir," Beverley ventured, "that you talk over my proposition with the Baron Genetter, your secretary here, and with Madame, and that afterwards you and she will give me the pleasure of dining with me this evening in my apartments or anywhere you choose. You can give me your answer then. I will have a notary in attendance and the business can be finished—"

"But the money!" Katarina interrupted breathlessly.

"I will pay over the money upon the signature of the document drawn up on the lines I have suggested," Beverley promised.

"It is an amazing idea!" she exclaimed. "We accept, do we not, my little one? It is a dinner which I shall eat with an appetite."

Nicolas was not quite so quick in making up his mind. There was something of interrogation in that swift glance which flashed between Genetter and himself. The pressure of Katarina's fingers upon his arm was, however, almost compelling.

"Thank you, Mr. Beverley," he said. "We will accept your invitation, and at present I see no reason why we should not bring the affair to the conclusion you suggest. Under existing conditions," he added with a slight cough, "we do not appear in the restaurant. We dine only privately. Your apartment, therefore, in the hotel would be desirable."

Katarina indulged in a gesture of disappointment.

"Where is the pleasure of my new gowns and that divine ermine cape if we are to dine privately all the time?" she demanded.

Nicolas had recovered something of his dignity.

"We are the victims of what amounts almost to a prosecution from the Press just now," he explained to Beverley. "I have a great objection to figuring continually in the chief picture papers, which I regret that your Western culture tolerates. It will suit us better to dine alone with you. Shall we say at nine o'clock?"

"That will be admirable," Beverley acquiesced. "My suite is on the third floor—Number Seventy-one. I shall expect you, sir, and Madame," he added with a little bow, "at that hour."

Bowing again in farewell, he passed through the door which the secretary was holding open. Katarina's eyes followed him to the last moment, then she threw herself into the arms of her companion.

"But it is marvellous, this," she cried. "What a wind of good chance to have blown this solemn Englishman across the Channel with his pockets bursting with money! Twenty-five thousand pounds! Do you realise what this means to us, my beloved?"

"Realise it? Of course I do," Nicolas, who was regretting very much that Katarina had not extended her walk for another mile or so, replied. "But you must remember, little one, we have debts."

"Pooh!" she scoffed. "The Englishman must pay them."

"What do you think of it, Genetter?" Nicolas asked, turning to the melancholy figure standing looking out of the window.

"The man Beverley," Genetter replied, "knows more than he tells us. Still, I do not believe that there is any more bauxite in the kingdom."

"In that case," Nicolas reflected, "the sooner I sign this new agreement and touch the money the better!"

CHAPTER VII

It was towards the pleasant hour of seven o'clock that Nigel Beverley, having dealt with a considerable amount of telephoning and having made all his arrangements for the impending banquet, was enjoying a little well-earned repose stretched out upon his divan in the salon of his suite at the Ritz. From the adjoining room, where the valet was preparing his bath, came the pleasant sound of running water. On a small table by his side was a gleaming cocktail shaker, a half-filled glass and a box of cigarettes. He had just lit one of the latter and opened the evening paper when a slight sound at the door disturbed him. The

handle was quietly turned. There was no knock but the door itself was opened and closed stealthily. It was Madame Katarina who had crossed the threshold, Madame in an exquisitely fashioned but daring negligé of black crepe georgette. Beverley sprang to his feet.

"Madame!" he exclaimed, and there was distinct alarm in his voice.

She laughed at his embarrassment.

"My dear Mr. Englishman," she remonstrated. "Why do you look so terrified? My suite is in the next corridor. I prepare myself soon for your wonderful dinner. I pass your door. I open it and come in. Why not? A little moment's conversation."

"But Nicolas—" Beverley began.

"Oh, la la!" she interrupted. "Am I a fool? Nicolas has gone to the Turf Club. Every afternoon he takes his first aperitif there. You do not wish to have a word with me—no? And perhaps a cocktail," she added, glancing at the tray.

Beverley was swift to make up his mind. He accepted the situation, although without enthusiasm, and rang the bell.

"Ah, but you must not do that," she cried.

"It is for another glass," he pointed out.

"Stop the waiter," she insisted. "I drink out of yours."

Beverley made his way to the next room and dispatched the valet to intercept the waiter.

"It is arranged," he reported when he returned.

She looked up at him, her left hand at her hip, a flavour of mockery upon her lips, invitation flowing from her eyes.

"Good," she said.

She threw herself upon the divan. He filled his glass and passed it to her. She drank half its contents and handed it back.

"Mr. Beverley, this is a business visit. You wish that?"

"At your discretion, Madame," he replied.

"My discretion? Well, there is something I must say to you. Come a little nearer to me."

He was seated on the head of the divan and he glanced towards the bathroom, from which the sound of running water had ceased. He ignored her request.

"Let us proceed with the business," he suggested with an easy smile.

"You like me here, yes?"

"I am more flattered than I can tell you, dear Madame," he assured her. "My apartment has never been more honoured and the rose pink lining of your *négligée*, is the most amazing flash of colour I ever saw."

"That is more human," she declared with a gratified smile. "An hour or so ago you were so stiff and hard. Almost I made up my mind not to come, but it was necessary. You and I, my dear friend, should have an understanding. Why not? You want something from Nicolas. Nicolas—well," she went on with a little gesture, "he is my man, my slave. What you want you can have. But there is me," she concluded, tapping herself with her long fingernails.

"I am puzzled," he admitted.

"So simple. Listen. The twenty-five thousand pounds for Nicolas, that is good. But what for me? He will consent if I say so. He will say 'no' if I bid him."

"Madame," Beverley said, "I admire very much your plain-spokenness. To tell you the truth, that twenty-five thousand pounds is something of an offer, considering I honestly do not believe that there is any more bauxite in Orlac. Still, if Madame would accept—"

"A further twenty-five thousand," she murmured. "In notes—quietly and secretly."

"You take my breath away," he confessed.

"I might do that," she meditated. "It would be pleasant—yes? At any rate, the twenty-five thousand pounds would be the seal of our friendship."

"Madame Katarina," he regretted, "I could not give you twenty-five thousand pounds."

Her eyes seemed to dilate as she looked at him. Her expression changed into one of pained surprise.

"You do not wish—" she hesitated, "you do not wish to give me twenty-five thousand pounds?"

"I will not insult Madame by saying it is too large a sum," he rejoined, "but I cannot pay it."

She beckoned him to her.

"For one moment," she invited.

He shook his head.

"Alas," he replied, "I dare not. If the door should open, all chances of my concession from Nicolas would disappear."

"Idiot!" she laughed. "I have told you that Nicolas is safely away."

"No man is safe from turning up at any time when he has so wonderful a jewel to guard," he sighed.

"Oh, how much better!" she exclaimed. "I could almost let you off—a leetle—only a very leetle—of the twenty-five thousand pounds for such a sweet speech. Would you be happier if I had twenty?"

"Madame," he said, and he spoke with mock seriousness into which he contrived to impart a certain amount of intensity, "there is a certain sum which in notes could be placed secretly in your handbag at any

place or any time to-morrow. That sum could be no more than a compliment. It is inadequate—I know it—it does not deserve even a smile from your lips, a kind glance from your eyes. I know that, too. But alas, bankers are hard people."

"The sum is—how much?"

"Five thousand pounds."

She knotted the little handkerchief with which she had been toying and threw it at him. He caught it and placed it in his breast pocket.

"You are the rudest man I did ever meet!" she exclaimed.

"It is not my will," he assured her.

"You offer me—what did you say?—ten thousand pounds?"

"Five thousand," he corrected her gravely. "It is nothing—I know that full well, but remember it is only to purchase just a shadow of good will, just that your fingers guide the fingers of Nicolas at the foot of the deed which my notary will present to-night. Sorrowfully I repeat that it is a compliment only. You will owe me nothing when the deed is signed."

She drew a long sigh. He was a hard one, this Englishman.

"I am humiliated," she declared. "I am very, very sad. I am perhaps getting old. Am I losing my looks, Monsieur Beverley? Is it my charm perhaps that has gone? I have not what you Westerners call glamour? It is that, perhaps. I do not please you."

"Am I the only one," he asked, "who would hesitate at the idea of following in the footsteps of the King?"

"It does not flatter you?"

"At such a time, at this particular moment when I am asking—well—a favour of Nicolas, I would not admit even to myself that I had ventured to raise my eyes to his most precious possession."

She sat upright on the divan. The smile with which she was regarding him had in it something of admiration.

"Mr. Beverley," she pronounced, "you are a very clever man. You are not at all what I thought you—stupid. The five thousand pounds, if you please, must be in English Bank of England notes. Later this evening I will tell you how to deal with them. A packet perhaps addressed to my woman, Madame Bonfils."

"Exactly according to your desires," he promised.

"And I am to be sent away?" she went on, rising unwillingly to her feet.

"If you could only guess," he sighed as he led the way to the door, "how unwillingly."

She stopped short. Her arms were making a dangerous movement towards his neck. He listened.

"It is the valet," he confided as he turned the handle of the door. "He is back again in the bathroom."

She drew her *négligée* closely round her and walked on tiptoe with exaggerated caution. As she passed him she looked up into his face. The gesture, full of good nature, diabolically provocative, was the gesture of a gaytime of the street. She smacked his cheek lightly and disappeared.

Beverley, with a sigh of relief, rang for a messenger, scribbled a few lines upon a card, handed the boy who presently appeared five hundred francs and a note addressed to a florist.

"Red roses, stems at least two feet long," he ordered. "To Madame Katarina, Suite Seventy-seven. Immediate. Ten francs for yourself—and hurry."

The *chasseur* smiled and took his leave. Beverley finished up the remains of his cocktail, glanced at his watch, and put a further telephone call through to Orlac.

At the end of a very excellently served miniature banquet Nicolas dropped his bombshell.

"I am not quite sure," he said, speaking very slowly and very distinctly, "that I like you as much as I thought I did, Mr. Beverley."

Beverley was more than a little startled. He looked across the round table to where Nicolas was seated very upright in his chair, composed and reserved in his manner up till then. His cheeks, however, were flushed and there was a slight filminess about his eyes.

"Sorry to hear that, sir," his host replied. "What have I done to offend you? Is the dinner not to your liking?"

"The dinner is well enough," Nicolas acknowledged, "but it is the effort of the Ritz. All that you have to do is to pay for it. You are too fond of your money, you Englishmen. You think of nothing else. You think you can buy the world. Perhaps you think that you can buy Orlac, even—my kingdom."

Beverley glanced across at Madame Katarina. From her first entrance into the room he had been conscious of the slight change in her deportment. She was wearing a plain white dress, no jewellery, but in her hand she carried two or three very beautiful red roses tied up with ribbon. Her gaiety of a few hours earlier, if it had not already gone, was very much abated. She was apparently nervous. There was trouble brooding in her eyes.

"Nicolas," she remonstrated, "my dear Nicolas! Why do you talk like this to our friend Mr. Beverley? I am quite sure that he has done nothing to deserve it."

"I am not convinced that he is an honest man," Nicolas said. "He is trying to buy my Crown rights."

"What good are your rights to you except to sell?" Beverley asked coolly.

"Twenty-five thousand pounds is not much money," Nicolas went on solemnly. "I have an expensive companion. We have spent as much as twenty-five thousand pounds in a month before now, have we not, Katarina?"

"That was when you were more generous," she replied with a little laugh.

"If you have changed your mind, sir, about signing the concession," Beverley assured him, "I shall not press the matter. I can send the notary away and we can postpone our discussion until my return from Orlac."

Nicolas swallowed hard. When he spoke his voice was very slow but very distinct.

"Your return from where?"

"Orlac," Beverley repeated. "I have been talking to my agent to-night in the Grand Hotel at Klast. He tells me that he knows the district from which this rumour of more bauxite has come."

"What difference does that make?"

"Only this," Beverley explained. "His opinion is that the bauxite, should it exist at all, is to be found in a tract of country to the extreme north and beyond the boundary of the Crown Lands."

"If your agent were here," Nicolas said, "I should throw him out of the window."

"It would not be a wise action," Beverley observed drily.

Katarina had the air of one who was becoming alarmed. She leaned over and laid her white fingers upon Nicolas' hand. Her voice was suddenly soothing.

"Dear one," she murmured, "you are talking foolishly. You must remember that Mr. Beverley is your host."

"This morning," Nicolas said, speaking with great deliberation, "I was disposed to like Mr. Beverley. To-night I really am afraid that I dislike him. How do you account for that?"

"Mr. Beverley has behaved very kindly to us," Katarina insisted. "To-morrow you will be yourself again and you will regret this foolishness."

"Not at all," Nicolas declared. "Mr. Beverley is not the man I thought he was. He does not drink fairly. I have drunk nearly a bottle of wine more than he has. I have drunk more than you two put together. I do not like a man who will not drink glass by glass with me."

"Then you will never like me," Beverley confided. "I am not used to drinking very much wine and I should never change my habits."

"Not even," his guest asked with immense gravity, "in the cause of politeness?"

"Certainly not. In fact, to be quite candid with you," Beverley went on, taking a bottle which had just been opened from the cooler and filling his glass, "I am going to drink this and no more. I shall take a liqueur brandy and that will be all for the evening. You, my guests, can do precisely as you like. You will allow me—" he filled the woman's glass, he filled Nicolas', then he replaced the bottle in the cooler. "There are two more bottles in the room," he concluded, "and doubtless more still in the cellar. Now, sir, I hope that you understand. I have in this glass all that I am going to drink. If that is bad manners, then I am a person with bad manners. Need that affect our business together?"

"Mr. Beverley is quite right," Katarina drawled. "Please do not be stupid any longer, Nicolas. There is one more course of this wonderful dinner to be served, I see," she added, glancing at the menu. "Asparagus!"

Fresh asparagus from Genes, with Sauce Mousseline. Let Mr. Beverley ring for the service of dinner to be resumed and afterwards we will speak of business."

She put her arm around his neck. Nicolas unbent a little. Beverley looked away as their embrace developed.

"What you say is all very well," Nicolas assented a minute or two later. "It shall be as you wish, Katarina. I, too, like asparagus. This wine is very good. I wish that I had not drunk so many aperitifs at the club."

Beverley rang the bell. One of the two waiters who, according to orders, were outside the room, entered immediately. The service table with its heating arrangements was wheeled in. The asparagus was served. Beverley and Katarina indulged in a little casual conversation about the theatre. Nicolas remained somewhat aloof. Coffee, fruit and cigars were placed upon the table. The waiters once more disappeared. The *maitre d'hôtel*, who had been superintending their operations, bent over Beverley's chair.

"The gentleman whom you were expecting, sir," he announced, "is in the ante-room."

Beverley nodded. The three were once more alone. The flush on Nicolas' face had subsided but he was still apparently angry.

"So you are going to Klast, Mr. Beverley?" he asked.

"I had some thoughts of it," the other admitted, "You see, sir, if this bauxite exists in conjunction with the magnesium in large quantities in other parts of Orlac, my company must be in a position to control it. My journey there, of course," he went on thoughtfully, "might be postponed or even abandoned if you signed the clause which you will find in the agreement that if these substances are found upon lands which are not Crown Lands, you will use every effort to obtain a concession from the Government on behalf of the Anglo-Orlacian Trust Company."

"Why should I do that?" Nicolas asked.

"Because if you do, the twenty-five thousand which I have been to some trouble to procure this afternoon in English Bank notes, can be paid over to you without delay. Otherwise it would be more prudent of us to wait a short time and see if there is any credence to be attached to this report."

Katarina gripped her lover's arm.

"Nicolas dear," she begged. "Please be sensible. Everything that Mr. Beverley has said has been most fair. He does not propose to wait even until he has found out where this mineral is to be found. He will pay over the twenty-five thousand pounds in cash to-night. What a fete day tomorrow will be for us!"

"I do not seriously think, sir," Beverley urged, "that anyone in the world would make you so good an offer. It is simply because we are so deeply interested in the new metal which we are turning out with the help of bauxite that I have made it. You must remember that we have already sent a commission of geologists and metallurgists to Orlac to search for further deposits of this bauxite and they have discovered none. When we come to look into the matter, therefore, it will probably turn out that there is not enough of it in this northern district to make it worth our while mining it. In that case, you see, you will have had money you would not have obtained in any other way. I am offering it simply as an insurance against anyone else handling the stuff."

Nicolas had still the air of an obstinate and bad-tempered boy. Katarina glanced meaningly at Beverley.

"Let me talk to him for a few minutes," she murmured.

CHAPTER VIII

Beverley left them together. He went into the adjoining ante-room, chatted for a few minutes with Genetter and the notary, glanced through and approved the agreement which the latter had drawn up, and ordered the brandy. When he returned to the salon, however, it was obvious that Katarina had not met with complete success. She was walking up and down the room, and she had the air of one who was working herself into a fury. Her hair was disarranged, her beautiful eyes red as though from weeping. Nicolas was sprawling in his chair, his hands in his trousers' pockets. His glass was empty.

"No longer," Katarina declared, "will I live with a man who behaves like a fool. Do you hear that, Nicolas?" she went on, pausing by his chair. "I have had enough of you. Everything between us is ended. I go to London to-morrow. There you dare not follow me. I shall send a telegram to Gunter, and he can put the news in all the papers. The people of Orlac can have their king back again if they want him. I have done my best to keep him a reasonable person and make him happy. I have finished."

Nicolas moved uneasily in his chair. He remained, however, silent.

"It is you, now, who talk like a fool," he said at last.

She literally shrieked at him. She stood before him with both her fists clenched and something that was like murder in her eyes.

"Go and find another mistress to put up with you," she cried. "Easy enough, you think. Go and try! In a few days' time you will be calling for me, and I swear before the Holy Virgin that I shall not come. If I leave this hotel and you to-night I never, never return. Remember that, Nicolas. You sign the paper that Mr. Beverley has prepared or we part."

There was, for the next few moments, a queer silence in the room. Katarina stood between the two men, shaking from head to foot, her bosom heaving, her eyes dilated, her gesture as she stood with her head thrown back and her outstretched hand pointing towards Nicolas, superb. Very slowly the latter rose to his feet. With his left hand he held the back of the fauteuil, the fingers of his right stretched out for the brandy bottle still upon the table. He half-filled his glass, raised it to his lips and drained it to the last drop. Then he flung the glass upon the carpet and pointed to the door.

"You can go," he said. "You know who you are and what you came from. I will not let this gentleman into the secret. I am the ruler of my country and no woman shall say that I lived to do her bidding. You can go, Katarina. Do you hear?"

The change in her was curious. The passion seemed to die from her face and disappear with a little shiver from her body. She stood still for a moment as though she were listening to the echo of his words, then she turned her back upon him. Her walk was dignified, her progress to the door apparently unhurried, yet Beverley, although he sprang forward, failed to reach it before she did. She turned the handle and passed out without a backward glance, without a single word. Nicolas opened his mouth as though to call after her. If he had had that intention, he was too late. Beverley and he were alone in the room.

"What are you going to do about this, sir?" Beverley asked, breaking a silence which was almost tragic in its intensity.

"I am going," Nicolas replied, resuming his seat and stretching out for the brandy bottle, "to get drunk. I am a little drunk now. I am going to get very much drunker. Sit down, my friend, and watch me. This stuff is stronger than ordinary cognac. It is Armagnac, seventy years old. This is what I think of it."

He raised the glass to his lips. Presently he set it down. His head had been upturned to the ceiling and when he glanced across at the table the bottle was gone. He turned upon his companion in cold fury.

"I'm sorry," Beverley said, interrupting his torrent of words, "but I do not wish to see you commit suicide before my eyes. Besides, I should like a little of that Armagnac myself before you drink it all."

He poured himself out a reasonable portion from the bottle, which he then placed by the side of his chair. He sipped it with the air of a connoisseur, and set down his glass.

"Your Majesty," he began with a sudden change of tone, "forgive me if I ignore for a moment your incognito. This is not the way for a person of royal birth to dismiss a woman who has at any rate served him to the best of her ability, who has been his companion for many years—very probably his faithful companion—"

"Who knows about women?" Nicolas interrupted.

"None of us, happily," Beverley continued. "What does that matter? Your romance is known everywhere. It will remain an ugly spot in your life if Madame leaves here in anger, driven out by your cruel words."

"She leaves at her own desire," Nicolas muttered.

"She does nothing of the sort," Beverley contradicted. "She leaves because you have scouted her advice, because you have drunk too much wine in her presence, because you have treated her not as a comrade but as a woman you might have found at a *café chantant*. Madame Katarina is a world-famed diva. Her talent has made her known throughout Europe. She has earned the right to be treated with respect, even by a king."

Nicolas staggered to his feet. His fists were clenched and he seemed about to spring at Beverley.

"Who are you to come here and address me in this fashion?" he enquired. "You—an English merchant—a huckster of money! Do you know that you are speaking to a king?"

"Quite well," was the quiet reply, "and no one regrets the necessity of my words more than I do. Your Majesty, I beg you once more to leave that brandy alone, to pull yourself together, to find Madame in her apartment and offer her your apologies. As for my concession, you can sign it or not as you will. If you have twenty-five thousand pounds to throw away do so. There may come a time when you will regret it but that is of no consequence. I give you good advice. In a few minutes you may be too late. It doesn't take a woman long to leave her temporary home when she has been insulted and hurt by her protector."

"What do you know about my affairs?" Nicolas demanded.

"Nothing," was the frank reply. "Except for an hour in the palace at Klast I know nothing of you. I have never spoken to Madame Katarina before in my life. I read few newspapers, the gossip of Courts lies outside my life. But to-day I have heard a man talk to a woman, I have seen that woman suffer and it is enough."

"That will do," Nicolas declared. "You had better leave me now. As regards this paper you want me to sign, Genetter can see to it. I will place the matter in the hands of my counsellors."

"You will pardon my reminding you," Beverley pointed out, "but it is not for me to go, sir. These are my apartments and you are at the moment my guest."

Nicolas shrugged his shoulders.

"I suppose you are right," he admitted moodily. "You have given me, at any rate, an excellent dinner, Mr. Beverley, and the Armagnac is wonderful. I have changed my mind about getting drunk. There is a certain amount of wisdom in your advice."

Beverley sprang to his feet.

"You will allow me," he begged.

He took a glass from the table and poured into it a little of the Armagnac. He handed it to Nicolas and bowed, then he filled his own glass.

"It is indeed a wonderful beverage," he said. "I am scarcely an epicure in these matters but the *maitre d'hôtel* told me that you preferred it to any of their brandies."

"He was right," Nicolas declared. "I drink to your good health, Mr. Beverley, and I offer you my thanks—"

It was a suspended toast. The door was quietly opened and left open. Katarina entered the room. She was wearing travelling clothes, a quiet hat with a half-veil. Upon the threshold behind her stood her grey-haired maid carrying a large dressing case and also attired for a journey. Katarina, without a glance towards Nicolas, came over to Beverley and held out her hand.

"You will excuse all that has happened, Mr. Beverley?" she begged, with an undernote of dignity in her tone. "You know I am half a gipsy. You know how hard it is to resist when one is driven into madness. Forgive me and—good-bye."

Beverley lifted her fingers to his lips. She turned away still without a glance towards Nicolas, who was standing watching her, tense and breathless.

"Is this journey necessary, Madame?" Beverley asked.

"It is necessary," she replied. "I have places on the boat to London."

"We shall probably meet later."

She was very pale, her voice was very quiet. There seemed to be an unnatural restraint about her manner and her movements. She turned to the door to find Nicolas standing in the way. Even then she did not raise her voice.

"You will be so kind as to permit me to pass," she said.

"Not I!" he answered fiercely. "Where are you going?"

"It is no longer your affair."

There was another breathless moment. Katarina was like the wan shadow of a woman, her eyes sad and without lustre, all the life apparently gone from her tone and movements. The splendid vitality of her ardent feminism seemed to be a dead thing. Nicolas, on the other hand, was like a man awakened into fury. The slight heaviness of feature had gone. He leaned towards the woman and Beverley for a moment was afraid that he was about to strike her.

"You lie!" he cried savagely. "You are my affair and will be till you die!"

He took her suddenly into his arms. With his right hand he tore the hat from her head and flung it to a distant corner of the room. The fur cape he sent after it. She lay in his arms utterly passive, as white as death and speechless. He held her so closely to him that a little shiver of pain passed through her body.

"Get back to your room," he ordered the maid. "Unpack everything. Wait there for your mistress. Close the door after you. Do you hear?"

The woman went. Nicolas turned to Beverley. His other arm was around Katarina now.

"Listen," he said, "go to your notary. Wait there. In ten minutes I will be with you."

Beverley hesitated. Nicolas had the air of a man who was holding himself in with a terrific effort.

"You will remember that you are hurting her," he ventured.

For a moment there was an ugly pause. Katarina half-opened her eyes. Her left arm, which was hanging limply by her side, was drawn up. She pointed vaguely to the door.

"If I could breathe," she murmured.

Nicolas relaxed his hold.

"You had better go," she said to Beverley. "I am not afraid. He will not hurt me."

Beverley hesitated yet again, then he made his way to the door. He seemed to be already forgotten. Nicolas was carrying the girl in his arms towards the fauteuil. The fury had left his face. He was looking anxiously into her half-opened eyes. Beverley passed silently out of the room.

In a very little more than the ten minutes for which he had asked, Nicolas presented himself in the ante-room where Beverley had just finished reading the agreement. He had not in the least the appearance of a man who had passed through an emotional crisis. On the other hand, his manner was a little distraught.

"You have read through the agreement?" he asked Beverley.

"I have just finished, sir. With one slight alteration which the notary has effected it is satisfactory."

"And the sum of money you mentioned?"

"Is here," Beverley pointed out, producing a packet.

Nicolas tossed it over to Genetter, who had been talking to the notary.

"Count that, Genetter," he enjoined. "Quickly."

"Will you read the agreement yourself," Beverley asked, "or would you like me to read it—or the notary?"

"Myself," was the prompt reply. "Give it to me."

He threw himself into an easy chair and began to read swiftly, turning over the pages one by one. In five minutes he had finished. He asked no questions whatever.

"Give me a pen," he demanded. "Good. Where do I sign?"

The notary became a person of importance. He pointed out exactly where the signature must be, affixed the seal and signed himself with many flourishes of the pen.

"An independent witness is an advantage," he confided.

Beverley also signed. The document was replaced in the envelope and he thrust it into his pocket.

"In English money," the Baron announced, "one finds here twenty-five thousand pounds."

"Put it into the safe behind my bed," Nicolas ordered. "You understand, Genetter? It is not a sum I care to carry about with me. Our business is now, I believe, completed."

The notary took his leave. Beverley and his guest were alone for a moment.

"Madame begs that you will excuse her reappearance," Nicolas said. "She has gone to her apartments."

"She has, I hope, abandoned her intention of leaving Paris?"

"Absolutely. You must not take that little scene too seriously. The lady has a wild and turbulent disposition. I myself am not exactly Anglo-Saxon in my temperament. Affairs like that, however, pass. She is particularly desirous for me to express her thanks to you for your entertainment this evening. I am to conduct you to her apartment for that purpose. She will not detain you for even so long as five minutes."

"A pleasure," Beverley murmured.

Nicolas led the way down the corridor and into a small suite looking out on the Place Vendome. He knocked at the door. It was instantly opened by the maid.

"In five minutes," he said, "I will return."

"I promise that I will have taken my departure."

Katarina appeared suddenly upon the threshold of her salon. She drew Beverley in and closed the door.

"He has signed?" she asked eagerly.

"He has signed," Beverley replied. "The agreement is in my pocket."

"And for me?"

"The little affair we spoke of is here."

She almost snatched the envelope from his hand. She bent down to get a better light from the shaded lamp, tore open the envelope and counted its contents quickly. Then she drew out a jewel case from her wardrobe, unlocked it, concealed the envelope underneath one of the trays, locked it again, and replaced it. She turned to Beverley. Except that her hair was out of place and that she had changed her travelling gown for a *négligée*, she showed no signs of her recent emotion.

"But he is difficult, that one," she sighed, holding Beverley's wrist. "Listen, you have paid him the twenty-five thousand pounds?"

"Every penny of it."

"In Bank notes?"

"That is so."

"Thank you. Now listen. This may not be the end of your troubles, although you think it is. Will you keep this envelope that I shall give you?"

"Naturally."

She wrote down a name, blotted the envelope and passed it to him. In the corner she had made a scrawl which was utterly indecipherable. He gathered that it was written in the language of her country.

"Put that away in your pocketbook," she enjoined. "If by any chance there is trouble in Orlac, present that envelope to General Kara Bavan. He is chief of the police at Klast. Say that I gave it to you. Say that he is to be your friend. That is all. No more."

"I thank you very much," Beverley said, placing the envelope in his pocketbook.

"You may never need it," she concluded, leading him towards the door, "but you cannot tell. He is strange, indeed, that one," she repeated as she opened the door and glanced down the corridor.

She held up her hand, Beverley touched it with his lips, and took his leave.

CHAPTER IX

At half-past eleven on the morning of the fourth day after Nigel Beverley's return to London from Paris, history in one small detail repeated itself. At precisely that hour Miss Dent entered his private office bearing a card in her hand. He glanced up at first without any particular concern, then suddenly he became interested indeed. The card which she was holding in her hand was of rather unusual but familiar size. It was larger than the ordinary man's but smaller than the woman's. From a somewhat bored condition of mind he found himself suddenly galvanized into a state of acute anticipation. He took the slip of pasteboard into his hand with a sigh of relief. His inspiration had not failed him. There it was:—

Marya [Princess] Mauraneco And underneath in the two corners:—

Violinist, Grill Room, Restaurant, Germanic,

Germanic, 7 p.m.-10 p.m. 10.30 p.m.-12.

Nigel Beverley remained for a moment or two curiously silent. It seemed hard to realise that it was only six days since her first visit. He wanted to dwell on the fact that she was there, a few seconds away, under the same roof. He had but to say the word and he would see her. It was almost too good to be true. He had not broken one of those good resolutions of his but he was about to see her.

"The young lady is outside?" he asked.

"It is the same young lady who was here the day of the meeting, Mr. Beverley," his glib-tongued secretary told him. "She said if you could spare a few minutes she would be so glad and she would not keep you long. Perhaps I ought to remind you, sir, that you have an appointment in ten minutes with Sir Theodore Marshall and at twelve o'clock Mr. Hansell is calling with the prospectus of the new flotation. He saw Lord Portington whilst you were away."

"You can show this young lady in at once," Beverley directed. "And Miss Dent—"

"Yes, sir?"

"Her business is of some importance. If Sir Theodore is punctual you must ask him to wait until I am free."

"Very good, sir."

It was astonishing how little his memory had failed him. When she came in she was exactly as he had seen her in his imagination a hundred times. There was the same shabby but tidy skirt, the unimportant hat, more than balanced by the general sense of neatness and elegance which gave her such an air of distinction. She was carrying the same handbag and at the sight of the smile with which he welcomed her her own lips relaxed. He rose and drew the visitor's chair a little closer to his desk.

"I am delighted to see you again, Princess," he said quietly.

Nigel Beverley was a man who never used set phrases, a fact which his caller seemed somehow to divine, for the slight stiffness of manner which he remembered from her first visit had disappeared.

"It is kind of you to say that," she confided, seating herself. "I wondered whether I should venture to come or send you a little note. I liked better to come. It takes me a very long time to write a letter in your language. And please, when you address me by name will you forget the 'Princess'? Whilst I am in my present position it is not a suitable title."

"Certainly," he agreed, "but what shall I call you?"

She considered the matter for a moment.

"Marya Mauranesco," she decided.

"Very well, Marya Mauranesco, I am very glad indeed that you are here," he assured her. "I was away for only one day and night. Last evening and the evening before I very nearly came to the Germanic."

"Your visit would have made me happy," she said.

"But I should have lost the pleasure of welcoming you here. Tell me, have you news from your country?"

"Not really news," she answered. "At least it did not come direct from Orlac. It may not interest you at all, but I must tell you that that strange man, the one with the funny coat who seemed to be all teeth when he spoke—Herr Treyer—was in the grill room at the Germanic the night after you left. He was somewhat troublesome."

"In what way?"

"He came and spoke to me when I wished to be left alone. He invited me to come to his table, which I had no pleasure in doing; he asked to be allowed to drive me home, which of course I could not permit. He spoke all the time of this great new discovery of bauxite and magnesium in Orlac."

"What had he to say about it?" Beverley enquired.

"He spoke of it as a secret, but a secret of vast importance," she went on. "He said that it would mean great disaster for your country. That I did not like and I told him so. He wanted very much to know where you were. He has rung up your office here giving another name. He asked me many times if I had not some idea why you were away from business."

"This," Beverley said, "is very interesting. I am so glad that you came to tell me. I cannot tell you how glad."

She gave a little sigh of content.

"I am pleased," she murmured.

"Now I will tell you a great secret if you will promise not to tell Air. Treyer," he confided.

She smiled scornfully.

"I shall not speak to him again at the Germanic," she assured him. "I told Monsieur Berthou that he annoyed me that second evening, and he will not be permitted to try and make conversation any more."

"A horrid fellow," Beverley observed. "I am glad you feel that way about him. Now I will tell you my secret. I have been to Paris."

"Yes?"

"I have seen Nicolas."

"Yes?"

"If this new discovery of bauxite is on Crown Lands Nicolas has given me the concession. If it is not on his own land he has signed a promise to use his influence as regards the acquisition of the land and the mining rights on our behalf."

"That was clever of you," she approved. "It was perhaps just in time. Shall I tell you where Mr. Treyer has gone? He has gone to Orlac."

"That also is interesting," Beverley remarked.

"He thinks that I am keeping back from him what may be happening there," she went on. "He will get permission to see my brother. I think he wants very much for his country to buy the land where this mineral is to be found. Have you discovered yet whether it is on Crown Lands?"

"To tell you the truth," he admitted, "I have not. I telegraphed and telephoned to the man whom I might call my agent there but so far he seems to know nothing definite. His opinion is that it might come from a district outside the Crown Lands, but exactly where he could not surmise. During the last two or three days I have not been able to get in touch with him, but that is probably because he has gone up north prospecting. No one apparently but your brother knows the truth."

She nodded.

"He said that it was a great secret. He would not tell me where it was. I should not think that he has told anyone. But for the accident of his being in prison," she went on, with a touch of that marvellous naivete which made everything she said so luminous, "I am sure that he would have been here before now. I am very happy, Mr. Beverley, that you have these promises from Nicolas, but I shall warn you of something."

"Please do," he begged.

"I do not trust Herr Treyer. He is not an honest man—except perhaps to his own country."

Beverley nodded.

"And what else?"

"I must tell you this also," she sighed. "I do not like to tell you but I think that you should know. I do not trust my brother, either."

Beverley looked at her keenly.

"You think that it is possible that he deceived you about that lump of rock?" he asked. "It might have come from my own mine, you know. A lump like that might have been picked up by any casual visitor."

"No," she said firmly. "I believe that he told the truth about that piece of rock. I believe that it came from somewhere in the country a long way from your mine but I do not know where. Rudolph knows. He will not part with that knowledge unless there is money to be made by it. Now I must go on and tell you this: I am afraid. Herr Treyer is a German. He would do anything, even kill joyfully, for the sake of his country. My brother is crazy with his hatred of poverty. He would commit any sin willingly to escape from it."

"A dangerous combination," Beverley admitted.

She was silent for a few moments. Her eyes seemed to be fixed upon the long slant of pale sunshine which had found its way into that sombre office and lay across the rich Turkey carpet like a thin band of gold. She raised her eyes to his unexpectedly.

"I wonder so much," she said, "why you, a rich man, can bear to spend days of sunshine in this terrible City just to make more money."

"It is not always that," he explained. "Sometimes one has to work hard to keep what one has."

"Your City is rather like a mimic battle-field. Everyone is struggling to possess himself of his neighbour's goods. And after all," she reflected, "it does not take much money to live happily."

The telephone rang and for a few minutes Beverley was involved in a mesh of business. He was called upon to make a decision, an appointment for one day was cancelled and another made, a thin, quiet voice spoke to him from a capital on the other side of Europe. The girl sat and waited patiently until he had finished.

"It is wrong of me," she said, rising to her feet, "that I take up so much of your time. I felt that I must come and tell you that I am quite sure my brother and Herr Treyer are planning something together that is not good."

He waved her back into her place.

"Believe me, I am grateful," he said, "and what you are telling me is important. I beg that you will not hurry away."

The door had been quietly opened. Beverley glanced across the floor to find Miss Dent looking at him reproachfully from the threshold.

"Sir Theodore has already been here ten minutes, Mr. Beverley," she announced.

He nodded a little curtly.

"If I am likely to be detained much longer," he said, "I will come out and speak to him. Do not disturb me now until I ring."

The door was closed.

Marya shrugged her shoulders.

"That is the tone you used when you first spoke to me," she reminded him. "I do not like it. You are very stern. It makes me shiver to hear you speak like that. I was afraid to come this morning and then you smiled and I was content. If you think I am telling you something silly please will you promise not to speak to me like that?"

"I promise," he assured her.

"I lie awake," she continued, "and I think these things. Herr Treyer now is very angry. You think that he is of no significance. I think that all wicked people are dangerous. I ask myself what he could do to bring us trouble."

Beverley was more than a little puzzled at her persistence but the girl was at any rate in earnest. Besides, he liked having her seated only a few feet from him. He liked to watch the slow and infrequent changes in her expression, the light in those deep-set eyes, the glorious colour and texture of that amazing hair. Her voice, too, with its curious accent, was like a stream of melody and a joy to listen to.

"Don't hurry," he begged. "These people can all wait. I did a morning's work during those few minutes at the telephone. Tell me really what is at the back of that troubled frown of yours."

"You are so kind to me that the frown has gone," she smiled. "I continue. I am quite sure that this German man has gone to Orlac. By to-day he will be there. Rudolph is in prison, it is true, but in Orlac it is very easy to see anyone who is in prison. They will talk together. Herr Treyer will propose things. If they mean money, Rudolph will hesitate at nothing. Herr Treyer, to obtain a supply of the mineral or whatever it is his country needs, will be even more unscrupulous."

Beverley nodded gravely.

"It is very sweet of you, Marya Mauranesco," he said, "to take so much interest in this matter, but even if it should turn out that bauxite and magnesium are to be found in a distant part of the kingdom in a spot upon which I have no claim, then it would take months, almost years, for anyone to mine it should they acquire the rights."

"Shall I tell you what I have thought to myself might happen?" she asked.

"Of course," he begged.

"The present premier, Lavaroko, is not a good man," she declared. "He was a friend of Rudolph's before Rudolph disgraced himself. Even now he has sympathy with him. There is a great deal of the wild country where nothing will grow in Orlac which belonged to my family. It is worth nothing for agriculture or building. Rudolph might claim it and there would be no one to dispute with him. Lavaroko might support his claim and my brother would give Treyer the right to take out this stuff."

"It does not sound very probable," Beverley told her.

"But listen," she persisted. "Lavaroko is like most of the people in my country. He is poor but he is greedy for money. It is said everywhere that he accepts bribes but he governs the country well so nothing has been done. If the spot where the rock came from, which I have still in my bag, was not found upon Crown Lands, it would be easy, with the help of Lavaroko, to declare that the property on which it was found belonged to the Mauranesco family."

"There would still be difficulties," Beverley reflected, glancing at his watch. "Will you excuse me for a minute or two? I must go and speak to this man who is waiting."

"Of course," she acquiesced, "but why not send me away? There is nothing more that I can tell you. It is for you to act."

He shook his head.

"I would rather finish our conversation," he assured her.

He was back again in a quarter of an hour full of apologies. Marya Mauranesco only smiled.

"It is I who should apologise," she said. "I take up too much of your time. I can only speak slowly and I forget words."

"Considering that you have never been in the country before," he said, "I think that you speak English wonderfully. Of course, the situation in Orlac, as you have presented it, is complicated, but as I have told you, I cabled and telephoned to a man who is on the staff of our mining enterprise in Orlac only a few days ago, and begged him to make certain enquiries. I have been expecting to get a report from him."

"What is his name, please?"

"Will Hayter," he told her, a little surprised. "It is not likely that you have ever heard of him, though. He has rather an indefinite position at the Klast Mine. I rather fancy that he must be prospecting somewhere."

"I can tell you where he is," the girl said gravely. "He is in the same prison as my brother."

Beverley looked at her in astonishment.

"Where on earth did you hear that?" he demanded.

"You could not read my brother's letter or I would show it to you," she said. "He simply told me that they were all very excited in the prison—that an Englishman named Hayter had been brought in on a serious charge of espionage."

Beverley leaned back in his chair. He was genuinely disturbed.

"Espionage! Will Hayter!" he repeated. "The thing is preposterous. He knows no more about foreign policies than the man in the moon!"

She shook her head.

"I tell you," she assured him, "exactly what my brother said in his letter."

"If he's in prison this accounts for his silence during the last few days," Beverley meditated.

"It is, I should think, a conspiracy," the girl decided. "Lavarokoj Treyer and my brother have a scheme. Your man Hayter has been put out of the way."

Beverley looked once more at his watch. There was a general shuffling of footsteps and rattling of lift gates to be heard. He rose to his feet.

"You will lunch with me, please, Marya MauranESCO?" he invited. "Afterwards we will talk over the situation seriously."

"I will lunch with you with great pleasure if it is a quiet place where people will not look at my clothes," she assented. "I lunched with the gentleman—Lord Portington—whose daughter you are to marry, the first day I came. But I did not very much enjoy it. You will not offer to take me shopping, I am sure."

"Not a hope," he told her as they left the room together. "You look too nice as you are."

CHAPTER X

They lunched very quietly in a small Bohemian club quite close to Shepherd's Market, from very simple food chosen by Marya, and drinking *vin rosé*, which was the nearest thing she could find to the Carlowitz. During the courses she spread out the letter she had received from her brother and translated a few sentences:

I have a fellow prisoner here, dear Marya [she read]. He was brought in last night. They call him a spy but what is there to spy about in this stricken country? He was arrested in the Café Klast and as he could not speak a word of the language, he seems to have lost his temper and struck one of the agents of the police, who is reported to be dying. If so, it will be a serious thing for him. He is an Englishman named Hayter. If he came to spy I think he must have been hunting down that crazy German, Treyer, who would sell his soul to find bauxite.

Write me at once to whom you have shown your specimen. Write all the results. Get some money advanced if you can. Send me a part of your salary—anything. I get not enough to eat and I have to beg even for my cigarettes. See again the people in London who own the Klast Mine. When I am free I can

talk to them openly. They will part with the money quickly enough. Treyer arrives to-morrow and is coming to see me. I hope for money from him. No one knows when my appeal will be heard. I seem to be forgotten. I lie here in sorrow and suffering. The few coins I have I spend in sending you my letters by this wonderful new air service. They should reach you in twenty-four hours. Do not forget, Marya, that you are my sister...

She began again in another part of the letter but stopped suddenly. There was a tinge of colour in her cheeks which he judged came from shame. Before she put the letter away, however, she read him a postscript:—

A messenger from Treyer has arrived. I was allowed to talk to him. He has advanced money. I have wine and cigarettes and more food. I have been allowed to go to the bath in the Governor's house. All these people around me have changed. It is as though they were starved for a little silver. Treyer is like an underground animal but he carries a purse. He is a sly one. He knew about the man Hayter. I cannot help thinking that he was at the bottom of the trouble in the café. If you are in communication with the Klast Mine people find out why they sent Hayter here prospecting and whether he has discovered anything. I believe Treyer knows, but he is a fox, that man. The Germans are wonderful. What they want they get. I do not like them, but never mind. If he has a scheme, if he makes a proposition, I shall say "yes." Anything to get back into the world, to see some lights and hear some music, to dance once more with one of the little fairies from the cafes—but that is not for you to hear about. Farewell.

She folded up the letter and replaced it in her bag.

"I think," she said deliberately, "that if you wish to make the best use of those concessions you have obtained from Nicolas you should go out to Orlac yourself and see what Treyer is doing."

He nodded.

"In a very few days," he told her, "I shall be there."

"And meanwhile?"

"I shall telephone to-night to our manager of the mine. How they ever got Will Hayter into trouble I cannot imagine. Why does your brother lean so much on you in his troubles, Mary a Mauranesco? Is there no one else of your family to whom he can turn?"

"Not one soul left in the country except Sister Georgina, and she and my brother do not meet," she answered. "For the rest, Russia, Austria, America have swallowed up all our stricken race. What property they have had which could be sold they have disposed of and they have spent the money or taken it away with them. There are lands still, but they produce nothing. Goats feed upon the slopes of the Mauranesco Mountains but the land is fit for nothing else. Still, this man Treyer, he did say strange things when he talked to me. He waited for encouragement to say more but I gave him none. I think he has a scheme at the back of his mind, but it is a bad scheme. It is a scheme of robbers. I think that is why he has gone to see Rudolph."

Beverley continued his luncheon and remained deliberately silent for several moments. Perhaps he was trying to analyse the curious sense of pleasure which he felt when he was alone with this girl, listening to her broken speech, to the words produced with so much hesitation yet always with a note of music as though all her senses were attuned to melody, and even in stumbling through the intricacies of an unknown and difficult language, her tongue faltered rather than produce crude sounds. What disturbed Beverley a little was the ease with which she seemed to talk in confidence to him and yet remain so delicately and completely aloof.

"Why are you being so kind to me?" he asked abruptly. "You search in your mind all the time for the things which you think I ought to know."

She studied his words deliberately. It was as though she was turning over his question in her mind.

"I myself seek for an answer to your question," she said at last, "and really I do not know. No one has spoken to me in this country with whom it gives me pleasure to exchange words or thoughts. I do not like the people who come to the Germanic. As for yourself, I have always the feeling that you wish to be kind. But please now we will make a change. We will talk no more of my brother's sad state or of Orlac. Tell me about yourself. Perhaps a little—yes?—of this young lady, the daughter of your friend Lord Portington, whom you are to marry."

He had very little to say.

"You will see her picture in one of the illustrated papers most weeks," he confided. "She is very fond of social life, for which I have not much time and for which I have no inclination at all."

"She is beautiful, I am sure."

"She is considered so."

"Clever, of course?"

"About things which interest her. She has a marvellous brain for contract bridge and she has some knowledge, if not a great understanding, of music."

"All the English young ladies are fond of games, are they not?"

"She hunts, plays golf, tennis—all quite well."

"You see her every day?"

"Heavens, no!"

He suddenly remembered that he had not caught even a glimpse of Ursula since that morning when Marya Mauranesco had walked into his office. Not that there was any connection between the two. That was ridiculous.

"You do not very much like to talk to me about her?" his companion asked with a certain wistfulness in her tone.

"There is so little to say," he replied lamely. "I would like you to know her but she is so thoroughly English that I think you would find it hard to understand her outlook."

"But it must be a good outlook," the girl persisted. "You are going to marry her. She has the qualities which you find most desirable for a wife."

He laughed, not very naturally.

"Some day soon you must meet her. Then you will see that she is not very easy to explain to anyone who has spent her early youth in a convent."

"Have you in the pocketbook a picture of her?"

He shook his head.

"I have a photograph of her portrait in last year's Academy," he said, "but I don't carry it with me."

"Last year's Academy? What is that?"

"An exhibition of pictures," he explained. "I should not waste your time going there, though. You should visit the National Gallery and the Tate, and some of the modern shows."

"You must write down the pictures I should see, please."

"I'm afraid I am somewhat old-fashioned for a mentor," he sighed, "but I will do my best. How do you spend your mornings and afternoons?"

"I make my own clothes," she told him. "Suka does all the mending but she cannot do the fine work. Unless it is very cold I open the windows wide and sit there even if I wear a coat. I listen to the many noises of London and sometimes if I close my eyes I can hear the beating of millions of feet upon the pavements. In the street where I live there are few passers-by. That I do not mind. What I like, too, is to watch the river when there is not too much mist. The strangest-looking ships go up and down. At night, too, when the lamps are lit, the mist is orange-coloured. Sometimes it is only a little way from the ground and you see only the sails or the tall masts and they look as though they were drifting through the air...Oh, the time passes. If there is not trouble coming in Orlac, if only Rudolph would keep from doing evil things, I am not so unhappy here."

"You don't like the people in the orchestra," he said. "Are you not lonely?"

She looked at him for a moment and that queer little smile parted her lips very slightly.

"I miss the convent a little but not very much, although my aunt, Sister Georgina, was very kind to me. I always knew that existence there was not even the commencement of life. Here, although I have so small a share in it, I feel life all around me. Everything that I see makes me think. I do not want anyone with me but Suka because I could not explain. I feel but I feel for myself. I cannot share my thoughts. Soon I shall speak English better, especially if you sometimes talk to me. That would be better, of course. You must not go for a few moments," she said. "I have not finished all that I wish to say to you."

"I am in no hurry," he assured her.

"Tell me please, who was the Prime Minister who signed your original agreement with the King on behalf of the people?"

"Stephen Lavaroko—the same man who is in office now if he wins the election."

"I do not think that he will," she confided. "I think that the communist, Pravadia, will get in."

"Does that matter?" he asked.

"How should I know? I am really a very ignorant girl. I expect everything is really as it should be, Mr. Beverley; but I am worried when I think of the German, Treyer, who wants so much your bauxite and magnesium—of Treyer and Rudolph together—and when I remember what Sister Georgina used to tell me, so sadly, too, about the lawlessness in the country."

"I don't think," he reflected, "that there's anything very much for us to worry about yet, but I owe a great deal to the warning you gave me. But for that, I should not have gone over to Paris; I should not have obtained that further concession from Nicolas. I wish that I could think of some way, Marya Mauranesco, in which I could show my gratitude."

"There is no way," she said calmly, "which would be agreeable to me."

"If you look at me as though you were going to be offended," he complained, "I shall be miserable. You don't wish that?"

"No, I do not wish that," she admitted.

"But in your voice there was already a warning."

"You must remember please that the interest I have taken in your affairs is just because you are the first person since I left Orlac who has spoken to me kindly, and yet as I like to be spoken to. It would be all spoilt if you were—well—to be like Lord Portington, to offer to take me shopping."

"I have no idea of anything of the sort," he assured her. "What I might have suggested, only I am not venturing to do so," he added quickly as he saw her stiffen, "is simply that I think you have an amazing gift with that violin of yours which you are not using to its full advantage in an orchestra. There are academies in London which exist for the sole purpose of receiving pupils in the arts. You can only go to them if you satisfy examiners that you are worth helping, and then, with the funds which other artists have provided, you may be helped to study and not be obliged to work in unhealthy places to earn a livelihood. Lady Ursula is a patroness of one of these places. I myself know of others."

"I think that I understand what you mean," she said a little doubtfully. "You would like to be what they call a philanthropist. It comes from your good heart, I am sure, Mr. Beverley. So you see I am not angry. But I shall accept help from no one in life. When I feel that I am likely to die of starvation I shall go to the minister for our country. I shall tell him that I am a Mauranesco and I shall beg him to make arrangements to send me back to the convent. I can live there if I wish for the rest of my life."

"It would be a sin," he declared.

Her silken eyebrows were lifted very slightly. Her eyes reproached him.

"It is not my idea of sin," she said gravely. "So now, please, Mr. Beverley, I must thank you for my lunch and go back to Chelsea."

There was something so definite in her tone, so unyielding in that barrier as delicate as though it were fashioned of the finest of lace and yet as impassable as though it were of grimly wrought steel, that he felt himself wordless and defeated. He was hurt but he was also afraid of what strange action she might take if she even guessed at his feelings. He hid his discomfiture behind a smile.

"I read not very long ago—since I have known you," he confided, "in that great book of reference which we call the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, that the inhabitants of Orlac are noted for their stubborn independence. Most mountain races are like that."

She smiled quietly and he knew that all was well.

"I am not so unreasonable as you seem to think," she said. "I shall ask you sometime when you are sitting at your desk and you have a moment to spare to write down the names of those picture galleries and to tell

me the pictures that I ought to see. Again, you can write out, if you will, the name of the library where it will cost very little money, or even none at all, to borrow books, and if there is anything you can tell me about the real music in London, where it is to be found but not for too much money, put that down, too."

"It will make me very happy," he assured her. "I see that you have some heart after all. Presently I shall feel that I dare invite you to come with me to hear Kreisler play the violin or to this new season of Russian Ballet."

From that moment he felt that there was truth in something which up to then he had only dimly suspected. She was beautiful. He knew it then and for all time. There was a light shining in her face which seemed to have broken out from some hidden corner.

"It would give me great happiness," she said softly.

CHAPTER XI

The remainder of that afternoon—a long one, as it was nearly eight o'clock before Beverley found himself free to leave Gracechurch Street—was a trifle chaotic. The following morning was worse. It was not until four o'clock in the afternoon nearly a week later that he felt himself able to deal with an increasingly difficult situation. It was something, perhaps, in his trusted secretary's tone, deprecatory but urgent, which supplied the necessary stimulus.

"Lord Portington has been waiting to see you, Mr. Beverley, for nearly half an hour."

Beverley's impatient exclamation died away on his lips. He remembered that in the City the one unforgivable sin was to display any sort of emotion in times of distress. He forgot that ever since he had entered the building that day he had been talking and arguing, dealing with all the annoyances of long-distance telephoning, speaking to difficult people with chosen words. He forgot all his anxious hours and nodded almost casually.

"You can show His Lordship in, Miss Dent, and see that I am not interrupted for say ten minutes. Then you can pile it on—telephones, anything you like. I really have no more than ten minutes to spare."

"Very good, Mr. Beverley."

Lord Portington was wearing a suit of well-cut tweeds which became him even better than the costume in which he had moved the vote of thanks to the chairman of the Anglo-Orlacian Trust Company a fortnight ago. In other respects, however, he was not at his best. He was annoyed at having been kept waiting, he was anxious concerning the news that he brought, and the hangover from a very late supper party had not been improved by a large and heavy lunch.

"Nigel," he exclaimed crossly, "this is really too bad of you! Do you know that I have been outside in your damned office for half an hour, kicking my heels?"

"Sorry, sir," Beverley apologised tersely.

"You haven't even a pretty typist in the place worth looking at," His Lordship continued. "Miss Dent, your own secretary, looks as though she had swallowed not only the poker but the v/hole of the kitchen fire-irons. You can't hear yourself think with that beastly clatter of machines."

"I'm sorry," Beverley repeated. "I have been here myself for nearly six hours on end. I haven't been out to lunch. I haven't even had a drink. Now go on, please, sir, with what you have to say."

"There's a lot of trouble going on in Orlac," Portington began bluntly.

"Tell me something I don't know," was the curt rejoinder.

"But you perhaps don't know as much as I do," his visitor persisted. "Sir Walter Harding, our minister there, arrived in London last night—flew over. I met him at the club this morning quite by accident."

"I have an appointment with him in half an hour," Beverley confided. "What's it all about?"

"Well, as you know, Lavaroko has resigned and a change of government is pending. There were a score of questions about the Anglo-Orlacian Trust in the House yesterday. They want to withdraw the concession."

"Can't be done," was Beverley's brief comment.

"Anyhow, they want to grant another concession to a syndicate of Germans who claim to have discovered bauxite in some mountains belonging to a young man who is in prison. Everyone was talking about Orlac this morning. Know the price of Anglo-Orlacians?"

"They were down five points at three o'clock," Beverley answered. "What's it matter?"

"What does it matter?" Portington repeated angrily. "Upon my word, Nigel, I don't understand you."

"Nothing to understand," Beverley replied. "You and I are neither of us the sort of fool who buys or sells shares on margin. Even if Anglo-Orlacians were five points down to-day and ten down to-morrow, they will probably be twenty up in a month's time... You will forgive me, I know, Portington, but I am hellishly busy and I have to get out some particulars for Harding before he comes. That German swine, Treyer, is out to get bauxite at any price. That's what it comes to. He's not going to get it in Orlac."

"What if they close down our mine?"

"Who?"

"The Orlacian Government."

"How the mischief can they? The King would have to sign the order and he will never do it. Besides, it is a British company working under a British charter. Everything is straight and above-board."

"Why does Harding think it so damned serious, then?" Portington asked.

"I haven't seen him yet," Beverley replied with a shrug of the shoulders. "Perhaps I shall be able to convince him that it is not so serious as he thinks."

Lord Portington's fingers strayed towards his upper lip.

"Of course, Nigel," he admitted, "you City fellows know what's what as a rule. I have no doubt our charter is sound enough but they are devilish fidgety up at the Foreign Office just now about anything to do with Germany."

Beverley leaned back a little wearily in his chair.

"I have no doubt," he admitted, "that there may be a little trouble with Germany. They want aluminium like hell and this modern combination of magnesium and bauxite seems so far at any rate to be a complete success. They will work for all they are worth but they can't upset a charter like ours or interfere with a mine that is already turning out large quantities of the stuff and paying generous royalties to the King and the Government. We may have rather a weak-kneed lot at the Foreign Office but they can't allow Orlac to interfere in a perfectly legitimate and well-established British enterprise."

"You would think not," Portington admitted doubtfully, "but you know how it is just now in the Cabinet. Out-and-out pacifists, every one of them. If Germany bullies hard enough and Orlac cocks snooks at us, what are we going to do?"

"Don't ask me, sir. Try and remember this: We are working an honest and lawful undertaking and although we are in a foreign country, that country is getting a splendid return on its concession. There's no human reason to interfere with us, no possible excuse. As for this reported discovery of bauxite in another part of the kingdom, that may have to be fought out, but the King has to sign any concession that is granted as well as Parliament, and I have it in the King's own handwriting that he will grant no concession for any further mining for bauxite in Orlac without our sanction. Come now, sir, what have we to worry about?"

Portington's slender fingers again strayed to his upper lip. The veins were standing out a great deal on the back of his hands. He looked longingly across the room.

"Save my life, Nigel," he begged. "Give me a whisky-and-soda."

"Help yourself," was Beverley's cordial reply. "You are a privileged person, sir."

"What about you?" his prospective father-in-law asked, crossing the room with quite amazing celerity.

Beverley shook his head.

"Not just yet, thank you. I have had nothing to eat since breakfast, and that was a thinnish affair. As soon as I have had a sandwich or two I'll take a drink."

"Righto."

"When you have had it you won't mind if I clear you out? There's Harding coming, as you know, and I have some more affairs I want to settle before business hours are over."

"Thinking of buying a few Anglo-Orlacians?" Portington asked, looking round with his tumbler in his hand.

"Might do worse. I'll look and see what I've got in my private account. There's not a sounder investment in the world."

Portington set down his glass empty. He was feeling and looking a great deal better.

"Not if Orlac keeps straight with us," he agreed, taking up his hat.

"It's a rotten country from what I can hear about it," Beverley admitted. "Harding is like all these diplomatic chaps. He keeps his mouth pretty well shut but they're a queer lot over there. You will excuse me, sir?"

"I'll go at once—I'll go at once, Nigel. Don't worry, but Ursula gave me a message. She made me swear I'd deliver it."

"Well?"

"She wants to see you urgently."

"Quite impossible," Beverley declared. "The last once or twice—"

"Yes, I know," Portington interrupted, "but this time she honestly does want to consult you and have a talk. She would have been down here this afternoon but I implored her not to come. I told her we were having a field day and that you would be engaged two or three deep. She was difficult to put off, I can tell you. If you said 'no' she wants you to dine to-night—we have only a few people coming and you can talk afterwards—or join a supper party she has later."

"Everything to-day is quite impossible," Beverley repeated. "You yourself can tell Ursula how I am placed. Tomorrow, if I am still in the country, I'll make an appointment."

"Still in the country? What does that mean?"

"Oh, nothing," Beverley assured him. "It just slipped out. There's no doubt that things are in a mess over in Orlac; and Hayter, the man I relied upon out there, seems to have got into a little trouble or been kicked into it. If I don't get a clearer understanding of things I may fly over. It only takes a day there and a day back."

Miss Dent stood upon the threshold of the room.

"Sir Walter Harding to see you, sir," she announced.

"See you later, I hope, Nigel," Portington called over his shoulder as he hurried for the door.

Sir Walter Harding was a diplomat of the old school, which had doubtless kept him in the smaller places of life, middle-aged, slow of speech, a trifle pompous. He shook hands with Beverley and accepted an easy chair.

"Some years since we met, Mr. Beverley," he remarked. "You will remember, I daresay, that it was at the banquet which followed the opening of your wonderful mine."

"I remember it quite well," Beverley acquiesced. "I thought Klast a very pleasant city at that time. From what I gather now, though, things have changed a little."

"The situation there," Sir Walter admitted gravely, "has become very difficult."

"Well, what's it all about?" Beverley asked, and no one would have judged by his buoyant tone and smile that he had been seated in a chair without food or stimulant for over six hours. "The mine's doing splendidly, we are thoroughly satisfied, and we are really paying a most unusual royalty to the Government of Orlac which they have received punctually on every June thirtieth and December thirty-first for the last four years. The King, too, has had his whack out of it."

"There has been no complaint about your punctuality or probity in any way," Sir Walter admitted.

"There's talk now about a further discovery of the mineral in another part of the kingdom," Beverley continued. "Well, that's all right. We are ready to deal with it if it is the truth, as I daresay you may know. I have already obtained a concession from the King giving my company the first offer of the new supply if we are satisfied that it is there and wish to sink another mine."

"That's quite all right so far as it goes," Sir Walter agreed; "but the position of affairs is not quite so simple as all that."

"Please explain," Beverley begged.

"The concession and the charter under which you work the Klast Mine was signed by Stephen Lavaroko and King Nicolas."

"The Prime Minister of Orlac and the King," Beverley acquiesced. "The charter, I may add, was submitted to the House of Assembly and unanimously approved. The Premier, by an unanimous vote, was instructed to sign it. The King was more than willing. Nothing could be more perfectly in order."

Sir Walter nodded but the uneasiness in his manner was even more pronounced.

"That is quite true, Mr. Beverley," he admitted; "but you know that there are wheels within wheels. The Government of Orlac has now entirely changed. Lavaroko has resigned and the communist leader, Pravadia, who is likely to succeed him, is an entirely different sort of person. The House of Assembly, too, is likely to be composed of a different set of members."

"It is still the House of Assembly," Beverley pointed out, "and the King remains."

"Just so. The King is not particularly popular just now. The matter I have come over to discuss with you is this," Harding went on, drawing his chair a little closer and leaning over the desk. "There will be a motion brought before the House of Assembly, the moment Pravadia comes into power, to revoke the charter granted to your company."

"Any such motion must be entirely illegal," Beverley said quietly. "Even if it were passed it could never be carried into effect."

"I must tell you that there is a strong difference of opinion in Klast," Sir Walter went on. "The position, at any rate, is serious enough to render this visit to London on my part imperative. The new Parliament will meet in a week's time. Voting will be taken upon this motion. The vote, if against you, will then be reported to His Majesty and his assent for cancellation will be asked."

"The King will not consent," Beverley declared confidently.

"In that case there will be civil war," Harding pointed out. "The King will probably be deposed, and the mine confiscated."

"And in the meantime," Beverley asked, "what steps does the British Government propose to take?"

"The—er—British Government?" Sir Walter repeated.

"Certainly. The mine is an English undertaking. It is owned by a British trading company, who have duly fulfilled all their obligations. What, I ask you, Sir Walter, will be the attitude of the British Government if any attempt should be made to confiscate our property?"

"Let me leave that question in the air for the moment," Harding begged. "Let me ask you instead what you would suggest that they did?"

"I take rather an interest in naval affairs," Beverley observed. "I believe that H.M.S. Lion is now in Malta. I should suggest that she took a cruise up the Adriatic."

"I must remind you," Harding pointed out, "that the Adriatic is no longer a one-powered sea. Germany also has a port there."

"Would that fact," Beverley asked, with the glimmerings of a smile, "deter the British Government from taking steps to protect the property of their country-people—property established by charter and according to international law unassailable?"

"I do not wish to seem evasive, Mr. Beverley," Harding replied gravely, "but would you expect Great Britain to embark upon a war to protect the property of your company in a somewhat ill-disciplined country like Orlac?"

"The question of war doesn't at the moment appear to arise," Beverley objected. "The sending of a warship is merely a gesture."

"The British Government," Sir Walter said stiffly, "is not in the habit of resorting to gestures unless it is prepared to give effect to them. I have great hopes myself that this affair can be settled by diplomatic means."

"That remains with you and the Foreign Office," Beverley replied.

"Your attitude—" Sir Walter began.

"Is as I have stated," Beverley interrupted tersely. "We certainly, as pioneers of a great British enterprise, will expect the support of our country. The trouble is that Great Britain has once or twice weakened at the last moment in an affair of this sort. She is beginning to be looked upon as a heart-and-soul pacifist country. I submit that, if the present attitude of Orlac is persisted in, this is one of the occasions when Britain should prove that she is not to be badgered."

"You are taking a great deal for granted, Mr. Beverley," Sir Walter pointed out. "One would need, for instance, to examine the statutes of the Orlacian House of Assembly. It might be found that a charter granted by one Government is not necessarily binding upon its successor."

"The charter is endorsed by the King," Beverley reminded him.

"Suppose the King is deposed?"

"These are not matters for my consideration," Beverley said. "It is for your Cabinet to enquire into that. You have no doubt kept them informed of the German secret service work which has been going on in Klast."

The minister moved uneasily in his chair.

"I scarcely know to what you refer, Mr. Beverley," he said.

"There is a man—a German—I think his name is Treyer. He does not act officially, of course, but he has been engaged in various underhand enterprises in Orlac. I thought perhaps you might have heard of them. Politics are not our concern here in Gracechurch Street."

Sir Walter brushed the subject on one side.

"I take it, then, that your attitude, Mr. Beverley, is that you hold unswervingly by the charter which you received from a previous Government of Orlac and under which you have been working the Klast Mine, and by the charter endorsed by the present King."

"That is so," Beverley agreed. "We have sunk three or four million pounds in the works and we have paid the King and the Orlacian Government royalties during the last four years amounting to very nearly half a million pounds. This may not sound much to you, Sir Walter, but I can assure you that to the finances of Orlac it has meant a great deal. Further, we have employed and are now employing a thousand people at wages such as they have never touched before, and every penny of it is spent in the country. We do not expect to be disturbed. We do not expect to have to circularise our shareholders that their property is in danger."

Sir Walter rose to his feet.

"It is understood, Mr. Beverley," he said earnestly as he held out his hand, "that this visit of mine has been entirely unofficial."

"Certainly," Beverley agreed, touching the bell. "I accept it as such and I am rather glad to realise that it is unofficial. But what I have said you may count upon as being the unanimous attitude of the members of the Anglo-Orlacian Trust Company who own the mine."

"Precisely."

Miss Dent came quietly in. Beverley shook hands with his departing guest.

"Please show Sir Walter Harding out. Miss Dent," he said. "Very glad to have seen you again. Sir Walter. Good day. Miss Dent, will you return in a few minutes ..."

Miss Dent duly made her reappearance.

"Send one of the men out for some sandwiches, please," her employer directed.

"I sent for some an hour ago, sir," the young woman replied. "Shall I bring them in?"

"If you please."

Beverley ate the sandwiches and mixed himself a whisky-and-soda. He interrupted his impromptu meal to ring up Portington House.

"Is Lady Ursula in?" he asked.

"She is in her room, sir. Mr. Beverley, isn't it? I'll put you through."

A few minutes later Beverley heard a familiar but somewhat weary voice at the other end of the telephone.

"Is that you, Nigel?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'm back again, you see. Did Dad give you my messages?"

"Every one of them."

"Well?"

"I'm terribly sorry, Ursula, but I can't do one of the things you suggest. We are exceedingly busy in the City, as your father knows. The best I could do would be this. I could come round to Portington House and have a talk with you say between the time you finish dinner and get ready for your supper party. I could be with you at half-past ten."

This time the very tired voice had in it some sign of irritation.

"Very inconvenient but I must see you. I'll be here."

Beverley rang off. For some moments afterwards he sat making meaningless scrawls upon the virgin sheet of blotting paper before him. None of these scrawls, however, had any connection with Lady Ursula Portington.

CHAPTER XII

Lady Ursula swept out from her room into what she called her "den" but what her maid preferred to designate as "the boudoir," and glanced at her visitor's attire in some surprise.

"You haven't changed, Nigel?" she exclaimed.

"Too busy, my dear," he replied, accepting a mild caress. "I have come straight from the City."

"Heavens, what a hurry you are in to make a lot of money! You have had something in the way of dinner, I suppose?"

"Something," he admitted.

"Like some coffee, or a whisky-and-soda?"

"Coffee, please. I think I would like some strong coffee."

She rang the bell and gave the order. He watched her curiously as she stood at the phone. Yes, there was no doubt that the newspapers were right. Lady Ursula was a very beautiful young woman. Her classical features were almost perfect in outline. Her dark hair and eyebrows were both attractive. Her grey-blue eyes, however, were a trifle be-ringed, and filled with an expression which just at the moment was half-peevisish, half-apprehensive. She drew a chair up to her finance's—not too close, not too far away—and sank into it a little wearily.

"I got rid of the people who were coming to dinner," she confided. "I have to go to the supper, anyway, and one must rest sometimes."

"I suppose so," he admitted. "Been going hard, Ursula?"

"Two silly picture shows this afternoon and five cocktail parties. I shall ruin my figure," she went on, looking with satisfaction at her shapely outlines.

"Are the cocktail parties important?" he asked.

"Don't be cynical," she replied. "If one's friends do all these things you have to join in or else you are very soon forgotten, and that wouldn't be any fun."

"So you chucked the dinner?"

She nodded.

"I had some caviar and bortsch with Freddie Dennison at a new Russian place," she confided. "We went on there from Judith's cocktail party. It was nearly nine, then."

"Freddie Dennison," he repeated. "I saw his horse lost yesterday."

"How did you know? You don't read the racing news."

"Not as a rule. As soon as your father explained that you wanted to see me very urgently, though, I looked it up."

"Oh, be a little sympathetic," she begged. "Did you ever know such rotten luck? He only lost by a head, and I backed him to win only. Freddie lost a packet."

"And you?"

"More than I could afford. It was not that alone I wanted to see you about, though. I really am in a hole, Nigel."

He nodded.

"How much?"

"Don't be brutal. Remember we may possibly be married some day, and that at present I should be your one thought in life. Cultivate a little sympathy. When I tell you that I am in a hole try and imagine what it must feel like to have an overdraft at the bank and not to know where your next shilling is coming from."

"I think I can guess that," he replied. "It is coming from me."

"Of course," she went on, crossing her legs and settling down a little more comfortably in her chair, "I don't suppose it is really the thing to do—to borrow from your fiancé. What do you think about it, Nigel?"

"I have no convictions."

She threw away the stump of her cigarette and lit another.

"Well, someone must help me out. I think I have screwed the last possible cheque out of Dad, and Aunt Harriet is lost somewhere in Austria and won't answer letters, and for the first time in his life Ben has written me a perfectly beastly formal notice that my betting account is very much overdue."

"How much?" Beverley repeated.

The coffee was brought in and placed upon the table by his side. Beverley prepared it and took a liqueur glass full of brandy. Lady Ursula held out her hand, glancing up for a moment from the half-sheet of notepaper on which she was scribbling.

"A little brandy, Nigel, please," she begged. "Pour it out for me, will you? That's right. If anyone rings up, Annette, don't put them through—not for a quarter of an hour."

"Very good, milady."

The girl left the room, handing over the tray to the waiting footman. Lady Ursula continued her task with the figures. A few minutes later she brought it to a conclusion.

"Nigel," she acknowledged, having glanced at it carefully, "I am really—yes, I am really ashamed of myself. Not that it is my fault," she went on. "One must have clothes. One must have one's bets. Everything is so terribly expensive nowadays."

"How much?" he asked once more.

"Well, it's awful to tell you how much I owe that's urgent," she confessed. "There's twenty-four hundred pounds I must pay Ben to-morrow morning, and there's another thirty-five hundred people are pressing me for."

"Making in all," he said without flinching, "fifty-nine hundred."

"I suppose so."

He drew a thin private chequebook from his pocket, opened it and wrote rapidly. She rested her hand upon his shoulder and leaned over him while he wrote.

"Bearer," she murmured with a little sigh of satisfaction. "How nice of you, Nigel. I could not possibly have given Ben your cheque, and I would much rather pay the others with my own. You are really sure this doesn't inconvenience you?"

"Not materially," he replied. "There you are, Ursula."

He handed it across. She put her other arm around his neck.

"You don't want even a kiss?" she asked him, with a really very seductive smile.

He escaped gracefully. He was careful not to push her away but he sank a little farther back in his own chair.

"Not just yet, Ursula," he said. "I am going to ask you a question first."

"Well?"

"Do you mind very much if I don't marry you?"

The little flash of gratitude which had softened her face faded. She remained surprised. She drew very slowly away.

"Do you mean that, Nigel?"

"Yes."

"Because of this?"

She pointed to the chequebook.

"Not altogether."

"You have been listening to stories about me?"

"I seldom meet any of your set," he reminded her. "On such occasions as I have I think it is well known that I do not listen to gossip."

"People have talked about me," she acknowledged.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"That happens, no doubt, amongst your friends."

"What they have said is not true."

"I am glad to hear it."

"You mean really that you wish to break it off?"

"I do," he repeated. "If I thought that you minded the least bit in the world, Ursula, I should be more apologetic. As it is, I feel sure that I am not hurting you and from the selfish point of view I know quite well that I shall get over it. I was never a marrying man, you know, Ursula. On the other hand, I have leanings towards domesticity."

"Well, domesticity does come into married life, doesn't it?"

He shook his head.

"Not from your standpoint or that of your friends," he answered. "That doesn't matter. I am not speaking harshly, really. I still imagine it would be very delightful to have you receive my guests and you would wear your clothes and your jewels in a manner which would reflect great credit on my taste, but you see I am not sure that that is all one should expect from the woman one takes—don't think I am getting sentimental—into one's heart. There must be other things in life. If ever I marry I shall try and find them."

"Stupid!" she exclaimed.

"Unfashionable, rather," he corrected. "Anyhow, there is a mighty past, you know, Ursula, of fiction, of literature, of every sort of poetry, which suggests other possibilities."

"Have you gone crazy, Nigel?" she asked wonderingly. "I have never heard you talk like this."

"I am not sure," he replied, "that we have ever had the opportunity for serious conversation."

"Is it too late?" she asked after a moment's hesitation.

"It is too late."

She held out the cheque.

"Of course I could not take this," she said.

"Will you please remember that this is the first request I have ever made to you and it will probably be the last?" he answered earnestly. "Keep it, Ursula. What has happened is my fault as much as yours. My thoughts have been in other places than the places where you live, just as your thoughts have never wandered round the byways of my life. It would have been most unsuitable if they had. There is no such thing as beginning again, Ursula. We should have had to start the whole affair differently if it had been meant to live."

"There is someone else?"

For a single moment he hesitated.

"There is no one else," he told her, "but some accident, some chance in life has brought something into my mind—was it an inspiration or a fancy?—that there is a joy in life which is very easily neglected. We neglected it. We never took any account of it that I can remember, and we have gone on too long to drag it into existence now."

"Too long for you to feel anything of that sort for me?" she asked with a faint note of wistfulness in her tone.

"It is too late," he admitted.

"You mean it—about the cheque?"

"I mean it very seriously, and I beg you, Ursula, not to disappoint me in this one thing. You were grateful to me when I gave you your first present. I shall be just as grateful to you if you put that cheque into your bank and think no more about it. Come, we are friends?"

He put out his hand. She accepted it without the slightest hesitation.

"I always said that you were a queer fellow, Nigel."

He laughed.

"Ring the bell, dear," he begged. "The pompous Groves shall show me out."

She walked with him to the door, her arm through his.

"Will this make any difference to Dad?" she asked. "Shall you turn him off the board of your company?"

"Don't be absurd," he protested. "He is the most picturesque figure we have on it and I really think that in time he would begin to understand a little about the business if he cared to give his mind to it."

"I am grateful to you for that, anyhow," she said. "He would never forgive me if you were really angry."

They watched the butler mounting the stairs. He turned back towards her.

"My last word of advice," he half-whispered in her ear: "Don't marry Freddie Dennison. Cut him out altogether. He's a bad friend and he would make a bad husband."

She leaned over the banisters and treated him to a little grimace. After that she threw him an airy kiss and after that went back to her sitting-room, sat once more in her chair and asked herself whether she was glad or sorry. There was an unusual hot feeling about her eyes. He seemed to have left some atmosphere in the room which she scarcely recognised. She crumpled her handkerchief up in her fingers.

"What a fool I have been!" she murmured, and at that moment she really meant it.

It was one of Nigel Beverley's fancies in life to drive himself about London so far as possible. For a moment or two he sat in the driving seat of his coupe, after he had flashed on the lights and Groves, having bidden him a respectful good-night, had disappeared up the broad steps. He sat with his thumb hovering over the starting button in a curious fit of indecision. There was his club in St. James's Street, there were his rooms in the Albany—both quite close. Suddenly he made up his mind. He drove slowly into Bond Street, turned to the right down Piccadilly, to the left again past Buckingham Palace, and then down a long straggling thoroughfare into the purlieu of Chelsea and into that street with its high lodging houses where Marya of Mauranesco had her temporary abode. He reached the end building almost at crawling pace, swung his car round and brought it to a standstill on the farther side of the cross-road. Then he turned out all the lights except the small side ones, lit a cigarette and glanced once more at the time. The brackish odour of the Thames was in his nostrils, the tops of the bordering elm trees in the gardens were swaying slightly in the south wind. He sat motionless in the driving seat and he asked himself why he had come. Vaguely he knew. There were only faint ideas in his mind, however. None of them had taken shape. He knew very well what he was waiting for but he had not the faintest idea what he should do when the time came. It was that still, quiet figure with its strange sense of detachment that he wanted to see. He had kept away from the Germanic. It had been an effort. It had been too late for the Grill Room when he had left Portington House and he had not changed. He was not even sure that he wanted to speak to her. He just wanted to be sure that she was there.

A policeman passed and looked at him curiously. A Rolls-Royce car, however, is seldom affected by the doubtful world and the constable ventured upon a salute. There were very few passers-by and presently a soft drizzle of rain began to fall, covering the pavements and pattering gently against the leaves of the trees. Beverley let down the window and drew a long breath. Since the rain there seemed to be a new freshness in the night air. Big Ben struck twelve and in due course half-past, and then from where he sat he saw the two figures for which he waited step off an omnibus at the top of the street and come slowly down. Marya was walking a yard or so ahead, behind her the clumsy stout figure of Suka with a strangely shaped black bonnet tied upon her head. Marya was carrying her own violin case, and Suka a large brown-paper parcel. Neither had an umbrella or seemed to be taking any notice of the rain. They passed underneath one of the electric light standards and a sudden strange idea disturbed Beverley. They walked in a cloud of tragedy, these two—the strange, remote girl and the bulky old woman struggling with her load. They were not talking to one another. Marya preserved always that slight lead, and the woman rolled after her. But something had happened...Beverley wondered afterwards whether, if it had not been for that curious premonition for which he could in no way account, he would not have sat quietly in his place and watched her even though there was longing in his eyes and a curious, unfamiliar flutter of his heart as she stood by whilst Suka thrust the key into the front door and passed in to that dark fortress-like building—

out of sight, lost. He really believed that if Marya had followed her closely and also disappeared, he would have driven away content with his brief vision. Marya, however, by chance lingered for a moment; and this new foreboding which had taken possession of him was stronger even than his stubborn will. He stepped lightly out of the car, crossed the road and stood upon the pavement within a few feet of Marya. He stood with his hat in his hand and he was very near the electric-light standard. She swung round, her head a little upraised, and looked at him questioningly at first and then with a sudden relief.

"Marya Mauranesco," he said, "may I speak to you for just a moment?"

He knew in those few seconds that his premonition had been a true one. There was proof of it in her nervous start, that first wary look in her eyes as she raised them to his.

"You!" she exclaimed. "Why are you here? Speak to me—I do not understand. Why are you here?"

"I cannot tell you," he admitted. "I had an idea that you wanted me."

"It is strange, that," she said wonderingly. "Tell me why you have come, please, because I am a little frightened."

Notwithstanding the unchanging quiet of her tone, he knew that she was speaking the truth. His own curious lapse into a confused state of living passed.

"Marya," he said, "you know quite well that you have nothing to fear from me. I took a little drive on my way home—see, there's my car. I had a fancy to see you come home to-night, and to know that all was well with you."

"You have not seen Lord Portington?"

"Not to-night. I have come from Portington House. He was not there."

She leaned the violin case which she had been carrying against the railing. The door was suddenly pulled wide open. Suka stood there upon the threshold looking out upon them. Her dark face, with the beetling eyebrows drawn together now in a frown of anger, was curiously forbidding. She spoke rapidly to Marya in their own language. Marya answered. There was a touch of hauteur in her gesture as she pointed to the violin case, waved her away and turned to Beverley.

"You will walk with me a few steps—yes?—so far, perhaps, as the river? I have something to speak to you."

"Willingly," he agreed.

The woman behind them picked up the violin case, glowered for a minute at Beverley and re-entered the building.

"I had need of you to-night," the girl said as they walked side by side. "You have spoken to me like a friend. You must do something for me."

"I will do anything in my power," he told her. "It will give me great pleasure."

"I humiliate myself that I ask but there is no one else," she continued. "I have been told to leave the Germanic, Mr. Beverley. They do not wish me there any longer. They did not offer me money for the

nights I have played this week; I could not ask them for it. You must please give Suka and me tickets for our journey back. I do not mind if it is in a cattle truck. We must get away."

Beverley looked down at her and there was an immense compassion in his heart, a compassion which he feared wholly to show.

"Nothing," he assured her, "could be easier than that. I will pay your bills here, I will pack you into the train with Suka and I will send you home if that must be. Or if things continue to go ill there," he added with a little smile, "I might take you up into the clouds in my own plane and fly there. The Government of your country is behaving very strangely and I may have to go to Klast."

"I am ashamed," she said quietly.

"Why?" he asked.

"I am ashamed that you are so kind."

"But that is folly. I have a kind feeling for you, Marya Mauranesco, if you like me to put it like that. I am a man and you are a girl, it is true; but I am very, very much older than you. If you are in trouble it is quite right that I should help. Now tell me, why are you going home and why did you ask me if I had seen Lord Portington?"

"It is very stupid," she said. "I must ask you to walk for a minute or two before I speak, then I tell you."

He half-looked at her and looked away again immediately, for he had seen the glistening of tears in her eyes. He was miserable and yet curiously happy. They had reached the corner of the street and she hesitated. He checked his first impulse to touch her arm.

"We go a little way along there," he pointed out, "and we reach the Embankment. We can watch the lights for a minute or two and you can tell me what has happened. But there is no hurry. I do not forget that you are struggling to say things in a different language. Very clever," he went on, amazed to find that the fingers which drew out his cigarette case were trembling a little. "I remember having to order ordinary things in France when I was sent there as a schoolboy. It took me a long time to search my mind for the words. Here, where everything—life as well as the city and the people—is strange to you, it must be terribly difficult...Now we cross the road. I know you do not mind my smoking," he added, quite unconscious of the fact that his cigarette was already out. "We follow this railing a little way and we come to the river. Then you will begin to feel at home and you will tell me what this foolish thing is."

"You must not be so kind to me," she pleaded. "It—it hurts."

"Not so much as your throat will in the morning," he told her as they faced the damp breeze. "Here, put this round your neck."

He took the silk muffler from his pocket and handed it to her. She twisted it round her throat. They moved on in silence until they reached the Embankment. He led her across the road. They leaned over the parapet, watching for a moment the lights on the other side. The rain had almost ceased to fall and the stars were visible overhead through the grey lacework of filmy clouds. The breeze had dropped to a faint sighing amongst the leaves of the trees behind.

"You are very understanding," she said. "If I could talk my own tongue it would be easier. I expect I was stupid but to-night I played as usual and I saw that Lord Portington was there with some friends. There were two ladies whom I did not know and two men, one of whom arrived late. Lord Portington asked me

to come and speak with them in the interval and I went. I am so anxious," she went on after a moment's pause, "not to say anything which will hurt you who are so kind, Mr. Beverley, but Lord Portington said something which I did not understand when he came to fetch me, and he held my arm, which I do not like, and he did not introduce me formally to his friends. There was one, the gentleman who came late—a Mr. Dennison did they call him?—who filled my glass and who I think had had too much to drink. I moved my chair a little farther away and he said something."

"You do not wish to repeat it?" Beverley asked as she hesitated.

She looked up at him.

"Do you mind? He should not have said it to me. I could not stay there. I got up and I am afraid I forgot my manners, too, for I said nothing. I went away. After the next interval Lord Portington started to come up and I left off playing. I could not help it. Then presently the manager came and he was angry. He told me when I was leaving that I need not come again, that if I could not be civil to his clients I was useless to him. He gave me no money. He said nothing but that I was not to come again. We left the place, Suka and I, after it was over—we came out by the back entrance and we got into a bus and drove home and I was thinking as I walked down this street that it was very difficult for me to know what to do, and when I saw you—well, I thought of something that Sister Georgina once told me about invisible angels—I shall not tell you what it was, but it was wonderful that you were there."

"I am very glad that I was," he smiled, still conscious of the volcano which flamed at his side. "You are much too young, Marya, to be alone at these places."

"You think, I am sure, that I did not have good manners," she said wistfully.

"My dear child," he remonstrated, and this time he allowed a little of the natural feeling to creep into his tone, "if I had had a daughter or a sister in your place I should have been proud for her to have done exactly what you did. It is perhaps fortunate for you that you have a friend, and I feel that it is more fortunate for me that I happened to drive down this way to-night. Now we will walk back. I will have a word with your Suka. I feel sure she will understand my indifferent French because I heard her begin to talk to you in that language. You will go up to bed and forget all about it, and to-morrow I will either send you a letter or I will ask you to come down into the City and see me. I want badly to find someone who comes from Orlac and you are just that person. You will be able to tell me all I want to know. It will be very useful to me indeed if you will tell me just a few things."

"If I thought I could help you—" she began.

"Well, we will speak of that," he interrupted. "Don't try to talk, yourself, much more to-night. Just lie down and go to sleep as soon as you can. I am very happy, Marya Mauranesco, to be your guardian or your elderly friend or whatever you like to think of me as, and I shall have only one question more to ask you. Would you rather have those tickets for Klast or would you rather that the manager of the Germanic apologised to you, asked you to stay on a little longer, and agreed that you should not be asked to speak to any of his patrons again?"

"I should like that," she said eagerly but almost under her breath. "I should like that best."

"I don't think that there will be the slightest difficulty."

They reached the main entrance to the flats. As they came to a momentary standstill outside, the door opened and Suka appeared.

"You would like to come in?" Marya asked a little shyly. "I do not quite know where there is—"

"Of course I would not like to come in," he interrupted. "My dear child, Suka can stay and speak to me here for a moment and you run along. You shake hands with me and to-morrow we will meet sometime or I will write you a letter, but everything will be all right, remember. Sleep well!"

Not a note of what he was feeling, not a sign of that ridiculous turmoil of which he was half-ashamed and in which he still found a queer new pleasure...She gave him her icy-cold fingers. He touched them for a moment lightly, then he waved her away and called Suka to him.

"Madame," he said, "I think I heard you speak French?"

"I speak some French," the woman answered suspiciously.

"Your young mistress," Beverley continued, "is in some trouble. She does not understand the class of people at the Germanic and I am pleased to be in a position to help her. It is possible she may leave to-morrow, it is possible she may stay. If she leaves I will send you railway tickets to take you both back. If she stays you must take care of this money for her to pay anything there is to be paid here and I will settle with her friends in Orlac later on. I am the owner of property in Klast, Madame, and your young mistress brought me messages from her brother. It is perfectly in order that I should help her until things go better."

"It may be as you say. Monsieur," the woman answered rather more graciously, "but I do not think that Mademoiselle would permit me to accept this money."

"You are accepting nothing," Beverley told her a little curtly. "I ask you to take care of it so that you may not be left without money in a strange country. Use it if necessary or keep it till I see you again. It is possible that I shall have considerable business transactions with Mademoiselle's brother, if that makes you feel any better about it. Now go and see after your mistress."

The woman recognised the voice of authority. Perhaps, too, she had understanding. She drew a little sigh of relief.

"Monsieur is very kind," she acknowledged. "Mademoiselle is young, she knows nothing of life and it is a great responsibility for me. I am afraid to be alone with her sometimes, although—"

"You are frightened without a cause, Madame," he interrupted. "Mademoiselle is right to keep to herself and you will find that she very soon has friends. Good night."

Suka dropped him a little curtsy.

"Good night, Monsieur."

Beverley started his car and drove to the Albany. He made his way to his sitting-room, helped himself to a whisky-and-soda and sent his servant to bed. He looked round his very comfortable and luxurious den with a queer feeling of non-familiarity, then he laughed softly to himself. Everything was just the same except himself.

CHAPTER XIII

Miss Dent entered Nigel Beverley's office the next morning at an early hour unannounced, as in times of stress she was privileged to do. She touched one of the three telephones upon his desk and laid her hand upon the receiver.

"Paris calling," she said. "A very mysterious gentleman to speak to you personally—at once. Baron Genetter he told me his name was, or something like it."

Beverley looked up from the stack of letters which he had been busy running through, and held out his hand for the receiver.

"Beverley speaking," he announced. "Who is it?"

"Genetter. You remember, Mr. Beverley? Secretary to Mr. Nicolas. Please do not forget the incognito."

"That's all right," Beverley agreed. "What do you want?"

"This is a personal call from me to you, sir. I was much struck by the way you handled a certain piece of business over here some days ago. I am telephoning to you urgently to make an unusual request. In your own interests it is important that you should be on the spot here at once—immediately."

"As serious as all that, is it?"

"I can assure you that it is of the utmost importance. I give you now a piece of excellent advice. It is for your good. It comes from one who wishes you well. Pay a visit upon Mr. Nicolas to-day. Omit all mention of my name. Omit all mention of my having telephoned. The morning newspapers will afford you sufficient excuse."

Beverley's eyes wandered across the office to the clock.

"It is now," he said, "nine o'clock. There is a plane from Croydon at eleven. I shall be in Paris—not Le Bourget, I mean at the Ritz Hotel—at quarter past one. Will you make sure of Mr. Nicolas being there and prepared to receive me, for I must be back here this afternoon?"

"It is already arranged," was the joyful reply. "Mr. Nicolas will be here waiting to receive another visitor. It is I alone who know that the other visitor has postponed his call. When you arrive you will appreciate the need for this haste...Till we meet, sir."

Beverley laid down the receiver.

"A trifle annoying," he said thoughtfully as he turned to his secretary, "but I must certainly go. As a matter of fact," he went on, "there's no man I want to have a few words with more urgently than the gentleman calling himself Mr. Nicolas."

"Orlac?" Miss Dent asked cautiously.

Her chief nodded.

"There will be a stand-up fight between half a dozen of us within the course of the next week or two," he confided. "A great deal depends upon our friend, Mr. Nicolas. I wish to heaven he would pack up and get back to his own country. Miss Dent," he went on, "go through these letters a second time. Anything very important I'll deal with at six o'clock, or as soon as I get back. Telephone through and be sure I have accommodation this morning, and book me back on the afternoon boat."

"Are there any documents you will require to take with you?" Miss Dent asked, reaching down a small despatch case from the shelf.

Beverley shook his head. He was already struggling into his coat.

"I have everything in my head, thanks," he replied. "French money, passport, *carte d'identite* and a chequebook?"

"All these are ready in this case, sir," she pointed out, touching one of the compartments. "I am also putting in the *Times* and the *Financial News* of this morning, your cigarette case and a flask."

"Capital," he approved. "Wait here until I return this afternoon, Miss Dent. Answer any enquiries by saying that I am out of town on business—away for the day, in fact. I would prefer that even Lord Portington didn't know exactly where I was."

"I quite understand, sir," the girl assured him.

Beverley took the inside seat in his Rolls-Royce coupe which was waiting outside. His brain was a little too active for complicated driving.

"I want to call at the office of the managing director of the Germanic," he told the chauffeur. "It is next door to the restaurant."

Their progress was none too rapid. The usual surge of morning traffic was sweeping into the City from outside. In about twenty minutes Beverley reached his destination. The man whom he wished to see—Sir Samuel Jacobson—kept him waiting only a few seconds and offered him a warm welcome.

"Sir Samuel," Beverley explained, "I am here to ask you a favour."

"My dear fellow—"

"I know you will grant it if you can," the other interrupted. "Forgive me if I hurry. I have to catch this morning's plane for Le Bourget. Off to Paris for an hour or two. There was a slight incident—I don't suppose you have even heard of it—in your restaurant last night. You have a young lady violinist from Orlac playing there. Orlac is a country in which I am interested."

"Quite true," Sir Samuel admitted. "She plays remarkably well but not quite in the style to which my restaurant habitués are accustomed."

"Never mind that," Beverley went on. "The matter is really insignificant, but here it is. The young lady was asked to join a party last night. She speaks very little English, she is of gentle birth, just out of a convent, she either understood or misunderstood something said to her by one of the guests. She refused to sit down at the table and went back to the musicians. She behaved as I consider quite properly. The manager of the restaurant—I forget his name, Hudson, I think—dismissed her. He didn't even pay her for the broken week."

"My dear Mr. Beverley," Sir Samuel protested, "I can scarcely believe this."

"It is absolutely true," Beverley said, "word for word. My interest in the young lady exists because, as you know, the company of which I am managing director owns the Klast Mine which is situated in Orlac and I have many friends in the country. The young lady in question is not exactly a protégée of mine, but I have a great interest in her and a great admiration for her character and deportment. She is badly hurt and I

want you to smooth things down. She should have a letter of apology from Hudson this morning by one o'clock and be begged to resume her place in the orchestra to-night. You can let it go at that, if you like, for the moment, and I will come in and see you again. Here is her address. The letter must be sent this morning by special messenger or the girl will be going back to Orlac."

Sir Samuel held out his hand.

"My dear fellow," he said as he took the card and laid it on his desk. "I only wish that every favour I am asked was as easy to grant. You can board your plane—by the by, you have not too much time—with an easy conscience. The thing is done."

"Good man. I will see you during the week," his visitor promised, picking up his hat.

Beverley reached Croydon with ten minutes to spare. An emissary from the office was there with his ticket and a few notes of no great importance from Miss Dent. He took his place and at twenty-past one he was ushered down the broad corridor which stretched from the lift to the private suite of Nicolas at the Ritz Hotel, and into the small anteroom where he found Genetter awaiting his arrival.

"It is good work, this of yours," the latter said, smiling and rubbing his hands. "I scarcely ventured to hope that you would catch this morning's plane. His Majesty knows already of your proposed visit."

"And Madame?" Beverley asked. "She remains?"

Genetter indulged in a little grimace.

"Still here," he said. "Nothing will move her till the money runs out. We are all packed up for our return. There is trouble in Orlac."

"Change of government?"

"More than that," Genetter went on. "You will hear in a minute or two. Remember, you come as an inquirer. You have heard disturbing rumours."

The door of the inner apartment was suddenly opened and Nicolas came out. As usual he appeared in the best of health and spirits, and was carefully dressed for a promenade in the Bois before luncheon. He shook hands warmly with Beverley, took him by the arm and led him to a divan.

"Leave us, Genetter," he instructed. "See that we are not disturbed."

"Your Majesty has had disquieting news from Orlac, the Baron tells me," Beverley began.

"Majesty be hanged," was the irritated reply. "I am not at all sure I shall be a king to-morrow, anyhow, but until then do not forget my incognito."

"I apologise, sir."

"You have seen this morning's papers?"

"I have," Beverley acknowledged. "Read the Times coming over in the plane. Sorry I never listen-in to the radio. Lavaroko has resigned and you are in for a general election, which seems to be going in favour of the communists."

"That is right," Nicolas admitted. "It is very inconvenient, for it means that no money will reach me for at least a week. Apart from that, Lavaroko urgently wishes me to return and face the question which, although it has not been openly discussed, is at the bottom of the trouble."

"What is it all about?" Beverley asked.

"The party of the Left," Nicolas confided, "have demanded either that the accounts of the Klast Mine and our financial connection with it be published, or that the charter granted to the company be revoked. Lavaroko has resigned but there are persistent rumours that he is in secret sympathy with the party of the Left and that the crisis was entirely engineered by him."

"Perfectly breathless the way you people conduct your political upheavals," Beverley observed.

"They lose no time," Nicolas admitted. "The elections for the new House of Assembly are now taking place all over Orlac and if the Left get in I am to be called upon to withdraw my charter, and all royalties received from the mine are to be devoted towards the national expenditure."

"Sounds like opera *bouffe*," Beverley remarked. "If the King has granted the charter to the people who have sunk the mine on Crown Lands, and the acting Prime Minister of the country has ratified it, how on earth can any succeeding Parliament undo what has been done? Furthermore, even if a fresh Premier comes into office, the same King remains."

Nicolas coughed slightly.

"Yes, the same King," he assented. "But for how long? If Lavaroko gets in again and refuses to withdraw the charter he will be assassinated and it does not really make much difference whether he withdraws it or not, because sooner or later there will be a change of government, the new Premier will issue a decree of nullification; and although the land belonged to me, if I do not withdraw my charter they will call upon me to abdicate."

"Great fun you are having over there," Beverley observed.

"Well, I'm glad to see you accept bad news like this without flinching," the King remarked with a momentary gleam of admiration in his eyes. "You always were a man, though, Beverley. I wish I had a Prime Minister like you."

"I wish I were your Prime Minister, sir—for a week or two," was the dry rejoinder. "I should try to set things straight for you. It seems to me that Orlac is asking for trouble."

"That is what I feel," Nicolas agreed. "The more I breathe the air of Paris just now the less inclined I feel to go back and try what things are like in Orlac."

"I am not sure," Beverley said, "that I blame you. However, there might be conditions under which it would be better for you to return. Will you pardon me if I make a suggestion which is not immediately to the point?"

"Pray do," the other invited courteously.

"We had a pleasant voyage over this morning," Beverley continued, "but we met with a great many of what I think they call pockets of air. I feel shaken."

Nicolas' face shone with sympathy. He touched the bell.

"A blissful idea," he declared. "Two double Martinis, Pierre," he ordered from his chamberlain. "Make them yourself half-and-half, plenty of ice and shaken—you know—really shaken."

Beverley drew a sigh of relief.

"I feel better already," he said. "There are further and very serious complications in this matter, as I expect you realise, sir."

Nicolas stroked his chin and looked doubtfully at his visitor.

"Well," he remarked, "of course another little question has cropped up—"

"A very important question I call it," Beverley interrupted.

"That terrible person—the lisping German with prominent front teeth and unpleasant appearance generally—started it," Nicolas continued, "and by some mistake of Genetter's I granted him an audience. I heard a few words of what he had to say and out he went. He seems to be one of these fellows, though, who work underground for their country—more or less spies, of course, and a mischievous breed at that. The authorities in Berlin have taken the thing up now, however. They do not like your people having this mine, Beverley. They think you are getting more than your fair share of that stuff they use for blending with magnesium."

"They have been worrying about that for a long time," Beverley assented.

"I understand from Genetter," Nicolas went on, "that we are likely to hear more about this question of supply. Have you heard any more about the rumour of bauxite having been found in another part of the kingdom?"

"Nothing definite," Beverley acknowledged.

"You have none to spare from your own mine, I suppose?"

"Not an ounce," was the cool but very firm reply. "We have a hundred thousand tons' contract for the British Government. If the Germans do not already know that they have guessed it long ago."

"Awkward," Nicolas murmured. "Very awkward."

"It simply means that Germany will have to look elsewhere for her stock of bauxite," Beverley continued.

Nicolas was silent for a moment.

"Supposing it should turn out that the specimen the young man Mauranesco's sister brought to you really indicates the presence of bauxite in another part of the kingdom?" he asked.

"That would be very interesting, of course," Beverley replied, "but it would scarcely affect our position. If it was discovered on Crown Lands I have already the concession. If it is not we have your influence and your undertaking not to sign a concession in favour of any other nation. For your sake, sir, I hope that if it is a genuine find it is on your own lands. Even deducting the amount payable to the State, it would mean a considerable increase to Your Majesty's income."

"Badly wanted, Mr. Beverley, I can assure you," Nicolas declared. "I had hoped that your unexpected visit this morning meant that a further store of bauxite had been discovered, that it was on Crown Lands and that you were prepared to make a further advance."

Beverley smiled.

"Isn't that just a little super-optimistic, sir?" he ventured. "So far, we have no direct evidence that any further stock of bauxite exists in the country. The origin of the specimen brought by Marya Mauranesco remains unknown. Even if it should be traced, it will become a grave question as to whether it exists in sufficient quantities to go to the very great expense of mining for it."

"This man Treyer," Nicolas observed, "most impudently declined to disclose the whereabouts of the stuff but he was willing to swear himself black in the face that Mauranesco knew where it existed."

"So shall we in a very short time," Beverley declared.

"Just so. Now, Mr. Beverley," the other went on, as a waiter made tentative entrance, "we will finish the contents of that shaker together. Afterwards I am going to ask you one more point-blank question."

Beverley allowed his glass to be filled. As soon as the waiter had taken his leave Nicolas threw himself into an easy chair and with his hands in his trousers' pockets assumed an attitude of complete bonhomie.

"Mr. Beverley," he said, "being a king is sometimes the devil of a business, but it does not make a business man. I have been interested in studying your methods. I approve of them. I am about to imitate them. When you want to know something you ask a plain question. I am now going to ask you one. Precisely why have you come over here to see me?"

"Capital!" Beverley exclaimed. "I came over to ask you, sir, exactly what your attitude will be supposing the election now proceeding in Orlac should return to power the extreme Left political party and they attempt to upset the concession granted by Lavaroko and yourself to my firm. I also thought I would take the liberty of reminding you of that last charter by which you have undertaken to sign no other concession, even though your Government might present it for your approval. In plain words, I wish to make absolutely certain that the position of the Klast Mine remains and will remain unassailable."

"Admirably put," Nicolas approved. "I will answer you in the same manner, Mr. Beverley. I shall resist to my last breath any change in the charter or the concession of the present Klast Mine. I hold by my concession and I pronounce the illegality of any attempt on the part of the new Government to interfere with the charter granted to your company. I shall refuse also to sign a new concession, if the bauxite be discovered in any other part of my kingdom, to anyone except yourself; and if it is upon my lands I shall carry out my agreement to sign a concession for your company."

"That is what I imagined would be your reply, sir. Forgive me if I strike the nail once more upon the head. When you say that you will resist to your last breath any attempt to alter the charter given to my company, what precisely do you mean by that?"

Nicolas stiffened a little.

"I shall go so far," he said, "as to risk assassination or deposition. Can a man say more than that, Mr. Beverley? Bloodshed amongst my people is the one thing I have striven always to avoid. I shall go so far as to risk that."

Beverley considered for a moment, then he made a little bow.

"Your reply, sir," he confessed, "has given me great satisfaction. May I have the honour now of inviting you and Madame Katarina, if she is available, to lunch?"

"I accept with great pleasure," the King replied. "I shall venture also to accept for Madame. You had the good fortune, Mr. Beverley, to impress very favorably Madame Katarina. She has counselled me since your visit to do everything I can to further your interests in Orlac."

Luncheon was served—a pleasant meal which was ordered by Beverley with care, and approved of by his guests. Nevertheless Beverley, although he gave no signs of it, knew perfectly well that neither Nicolas nor Madame Katarina were entirely at their ease. When coffee was served and their host with a word of excuse glanced at his watch and asked the *maitre d'hôtel* to inquire by telephone from Le Bourget at exactly what time the English plane was due to leave, the signs of disquietude on Katarina's part increased. Nicolas, on the other hand, seemed to welcome his host's preparation for an early departure.

"An excellent lunch," the former declared as he sipped his coffee. "You are a wonderful host, Mr. Beverley. You have learnt to study the likes and dislikes of your guests. It is a great gift. I trust that you will return to England fully satisfied in your mind."

Beverley's smile and rejoinder were perhaps more courteous than convincing.

"How can one be more completely reassured," he remarked, "than when one has received the solemn word of a king?"

Nicolas sipped his brandy.

"You should have been a courtier, Mr. Beverley," he observed.

"Too plain-spoken for that, I fear, sir. However, I confess that I return feeling lighter-hearted. I myself," he went on as he signed the bill and pushed a half-hidden note into the hand of the *maitre d'hôtel*, "know for a fact that Your Majesty's interests are best served through my company. It is a relief to me, however, to know that nothing is likely to disturb your faith in us."

Katarina leaned lazily across the table.

"You leave us too soon. Monsieur Beverley," she complained.

"Alas, it is necessary."

"I have a letter," she told him, "which I should like to have conveyed to London. It is to me of very great importance."

Nicolas frowned.

"My dear," he remonstrated, "should we trouble a great business man like Mr. Beverley with a lady's note for her dressmaker?"

Madame laughed lightly.

"My dressmaker indeed!" she exclaimed as she handed the envelope across the table. "This note is to Monsieur Cochrane. He is the greatest impresario in Europe. Dressmaker!"

"I will deliver it with pleasure," Beverley promised, slipping it into his pocket. "I know Cochrane quite well. I will deliver it into his own hands. And now, alas, it must be *au revoir*. You will permit me?"

She vouchsafed him her fingers, ablaze with jewels. Nicolas extended his hands.

"We must thank you for a very excellent luncheon as well as for the pleasure of your company, Mr. Beverley," he said.

"I beg, sir, that you will not hurry from the table on my account," the latter replied with a glance at the half-full coffee-cups and brandy glasses. "The luncheon has been a great pleasure to me."

Katarina flashed a brilliant smile at him. Nicolas resumed his seat. Beverley made his exit, rang for the lift and descended. From a seat opposite the lift, when he arrived at the ground floor, a woman dressed in black, the obvious lady's maid, rose to her feet and accosted him.

"It is Monsieur Beverley?"

He nodded.

The woman kept her eyes fixed anxiously upon the stationary lift. She spoke quickly and in rather guttural French.

"Monsieur has a letter in his pocket addressed by Madame Katarina to a gentleman in London?"

"Well?"

She moved a little nearer to him. The lift bell had not rung, there were few people about.

"The letter is for Monsieur," she said. "He is to open it and read its contents. Afterwards he is to destroy it. He is to read it, though, before he mounts the plane."

"Understood," Beverley murmured under his breath.

The woman glided away. Beverley made his way outside, settled down in a corner of the car he had ordered, and drove off. As soon as he was well away from the Place Vendome he tore open the letter addressed to Mr. Cochrane. He read the few lines of the thin scrawling handwriting at a glance:—

Treyer is trying to get into touch with Predor Pravadia, the leader of the Left. They will win the election. Pravadia may repudiate the charter when he takes office. Treyer has rendezvous with Nicolas at six to-night.

Beverley tore the letter into small pieces and dropped them separately from the window. He leaned back in the corner, his arms folded. It occurred to him gloomily that he was likely to travel a long distance from Gracechurch Street in the next few weeks.

CHAPTER XIV

Marya's walk seemed never to change. She crossed the crowded floor of the Grill Room at the Germanic that evening with the same serene and effortless grace of movement as when on the night before she had trodden the rain-splashed pavement of the narrow street leading from the omnibus to her rooms. Watching her, Beverley, who had risen to his feet as she stepped down from the dais, decided that she was the only

person he had ever known with artistic sensibilities who was entirely devoid of self-consciousness. She threaded her way amongst the closely packed tables towards him seeing nobody, holding out her hand to him at the moment of her arrival with that same little gesture in its slight elevation of innate but unconscious condescension. He raised it to his lips. A waiter held her chair. She seated herself and her eyes scanned Beverley's face a little anxiously.

"I think," she said, "that you must be a magician."

"I am a very ordinary man," he assured her, "and the proof of it is that I am starving. Your glass I see is already filled. Your supper is ordered. Drink with me to my tomorrow's journey."

Her lips touched the brim of her champagne goblet.

"To where?" she asked.

"To Orlac."

She set down her glass.

"You go to Orlac?"

He nodded.

"I will explain," he told her. "You will be the only person in the world who knows the real reason of my visit. First, though, tell me—everything has gone well with you?"

"Everything has been as I desired," she said. "The money came, an apology, and a very kind gentleman who owns the Germanic met me when I arrived this evening and assured me that I was free to accept or refuse invitations, and he made me compliments on my playing which were not deserved."

"There is still something wrong," he said quietly.

"There is nothing."

"Then why are you not happy?"

"If you must know that, I am not quite happy because I owe so much and can return so little. I think that I did wrong to leave Orlac."

"Why?"

She hesitated. Again there were evidences of that amazing absence of any self-consciousness.

"I am lost in the world," she confided. "I suffer. I have glimpses of a life of beauty. There is no place there for me."

"I do not think," he reflected, "that these ideas came to you under this roof."

"It is quite true," she admitted. "I have been to see some of the pictures you spoke of. Yesterday morning the sun shone and I walked in the gardens of Kew. I saw more pictures in the afternoon. I do not think I shall stay here and play to these people very much longer. Now will you please tell me about Orlac."

"There is trouble there," he said. "Very likely it all started with the finding of that little piece of rock you showed me."

She looked at him wonderingly.

"But how could that be possible?"

"The people are discontented," he explained. "They think that money is going out of the country and being paid to the King which should come to them. The Premier, as you know, has resigned. The election drags on but they say that the party of the Left are certain to win. They talk of confiscating our mine, and, if there is more of this bauxite in any other part of the kingdom, working it by a coalition from which the people are to have the whole of the profits."

"It is stupid!" she exclaimed.

"It seems so," he admitted, "but of course there is something underneath it all. Treyer, our unpleasant friend whom you sent away, is plotting for Germany. He and the leader of the Left party seem to have come together."

She was thoughtful for a moment.

"But the mine which is now being worked," she asked, "there is no doubt about that? It is upon Crown Land. No one could confiscate that?"

"Strange things have been done in the old days," he told her, "in some of the smaller kingdoms of Central Europe. There is a strong party in Orlac, I hear, who object to the King spending so much time away from his country. He might lose his throne. Treyer is making overtures of friendship towards Pravadia and between them they might arrange a sufficient income for the King if he made over the mine...Please continue to eat your chicken, Marya Mauranesco. Just at the moment it is more important than the future of Klast. That we can do nothing about as we sit here, but the chicken might be taken away any minute and you would be hungry."

"It is true," she admitted, recommencing her meal.

They ate and drank in comparative silence for some time. Once or twice her silky eyebrows were drawn close together as though she were thinking. Her companion gave her no encouragement towards a renewal of their conversation, however. A wonderful dish of fruit finished their repast. She drew a little sigh of content.

"You are really a magician," she said. "You read the weaknesses of other people."

With the arrival of the finger-bowls and coffee, however, she was not to be denied any longer. She leaned across the table.

"Mr. Beverley," she said.

"Marya Mauranesco," he rejoined gravely.

"I do not think that you should go to Orlac. Let me ask you this. What is it that you hope to do there?"

"To stop this intrigue on the part of Germany to get hold of my bauxite," he answered bluntly. "They have discovered that blended with magnesium it makes the most perfect aluminium in the world and they mean to have it, whatever price they pay."

"You forgive—yes?" she asked almost apologetically. "But if they are so determined, do you think that you alone, not even able to speak the language, will stop them?"

He was silent for a moment. His thoughts were travelling a long way backwards.

"Please," she murmured.

He remembered where they were.

"Marya Mauranesco," he said, "in the days when I studied and loved Greek mythology there was one who had a theory that the soul of a man travelled with him through life but outside his body—always there to receive confessions, to give sympathy and advice."

"It is a beautiful idea," she mused.

"I am glad that you approve," he continued, "because I begin to think that you are taking that place with me. I talk to you as I would talk to no one else. I am going into a blank struggle. I cannot even speak German fluently. I have a great admiration for the race but I do not like them and I am going out to Orlac not only for the sake of thwarting their schemes but to hold my mine for the people who have trusted us and invested their money in it. I may do no good, yet I shall go. It is my duty."

"Yes," she reflected, "I think that you are the sort of man who would do that."

"If I do not succeed," he went on, "we shall either be placed in a very humiliating position or it will be war. England is not a brave country when the question of war arises. She would go even a little too far, as she has done recently in intrigue and shuffling, to avoid it, but this time if I fail she will be confronted with a definite issue. She might be forced to fight. Well, we shall see."

She looked at him wonderingly.

"A European war just for the Klast Mine!" she exclaimed.

"It might come to that. Walter Harding, our minister there, is a weak man and very gullible. The German minister is the reverse. He and Treyer are a crafty pair. They may get Pravadia to alter the Constitution so that the Government of Orlac can confiscate the mine."

"But how could England permit that?" she demanded.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Our own people would save their face, I suppose, by paying us an indemnity," he replied. "We don't want that: we want to keep our mine. That is the reason I am going to Orlac."

"You go when?" she asked.

"I dare not pass over Berlin," he confided, glancing around for a moment. "There have been too many spies abroad. I shall trust to my latest purchase. I have a plane of my own, Marya Mauranesco. Some day

in the dim future, if things go well, when you are a famous artist, I may take you back to Orlac to see your friends."

"I would like to fly," she admitted, "but it is not of that I wish to speak just now. I feel very much alone in the world, dear friend. I do not wish you to go to Orlac. Life and death over here are very important things. Life and death in Orlac are insignificant. Even the great city lord, Mr. Nigel Beverley, might disappear. You are not used to the undisciplined life. Please do not go there."

A warning note was struck on the piano, a bow was drawn across the strings of the 'cello. Marya looked quickly round and sprang to her feet.

"It is necessary that I return," she announced sadly.

He checked the protest which came so easily to his lips.

"What about the restaurant afterwards?" he asked.

"One does not leave the dais there," she said. "That has always been understood."

"Could I share Suka's duty to-night?"

"Share?" she repeated dubiously. "Oh, please speak simply. I am so stupid. I do not understand."

"Can I take you home, in the omnibus if you like, with Suka?" he asked.

"If you wish," she answered without hesitation. "We go out by a little door in Leopold Street. I would not wish you to ride in an omnibus. We will all three ride in your car or a taxicab, or, if you wish it," she added, "Suka can follow us in a taxicab."

"That we can arrange," he agreed. "At five-past twelve?"

"Please."

Beverley was too restless to wait in the restaurant, besides which he had a telephone appointment. He drove to the Albany and rang up Paris.

"I would like," he announced to the operator in the Ritz, "to speak to Baron Genetter, the private secretary of Mr. Nicolas. Will you see if he is to be found? I will remain here."

"*Bien*, Monsieur," was the complaisant reply.

Soon he heard Genetter's silky voice, at first talking to the operator then to him.

"It is Monsieur Beverley?"

"Speaking."

"You had your conversation with my master?"

"Yes."

"You are satisfied?"

"No."

There was something which sounded like a groan from the other end.

"And now?"

"It is no secret—I would rather like Nicolas to know—I leave for Orlac to-morrow."

"It is a dangerous enterprise."

"It is more dangerous to remain idle."

"It is very sad," Genetter said. "My master's attitude warned me that this might come. Neither Madame Katarina nor I, who are his best friends, agree. It is a foolish course he takes."

"He will discover that too late," was Beverley's stern comment. "I promised you you should know the result of our conversation. Well, there it is. Words, nothing but words."

Treyer came.

"Well?"

"After he left I knew that the worst had happened. I knew that Nicolas was no longer a sane man."

"He told you nothing?"

"He professed to tell me everything but I knew that it was not the truth."

"You listened?"

"Mr. Beverley, it was not for my own good, not even to save my own skin. It was for his. He is like a boy in the nursery who has escaped and having the power has plunged into the great world. Nicolas will lose his kingdom and his mistress and his life. You and I alone can save him."

"It may be your business," Beverley said. "It is not mine."

"He is very young."

"What is that to me?" Beverley retorted with a touch of scorn in his tone. "He is old enough to waste his money upon an extravagant mistress, to break his word of honour, the word of honour of a king, to deceive those who have treated him honestly. If he perseveres in such courses why should I care whether he lives or dies?"

"It is easy speech but there are those who love Nicolas."

"Sorry for them," Beverley replied.

"If there is any change in the situation, where could I find you?"

"You could write me to the office of the mine in Klast."

"Alas, that I dare not do," Genetter confessed. "Your letters—if not to-day, to-morrow or the next day—will be censored."

"Then leave it alone," Beverley advised. "We shall be fighting in different camps, anyhow, Genetter. If Nicolas comes to his senses we may meet. If not, better forget that we ever tried to help him behind his back. Good night. They are calling for the line."

Beverley laid down the receiver and glanced at his watch. It was still only eleven o'clock. He unlocked the door of the room in which he had been telephoning and rang for his servant.

"Martin," he enquired, "my things are all packed?"

"Everything, sir. You will pardon me but—I hope I did right, sir—Lord Portington called and wished to see you urgently. I told him that you were not to be disturbed. He is waiting in the dining-room."

Beverley nodded.

"You can send him in."

Portington entered the room with a very long face indeed.

"My dear Nigel," he said, "have you seen anything of Appleby?"

"Thank God, no," Beverley replied. "He is the one man I have been trying to avoid."

"I have just left him," Portington went on. "He couldn't find you so he had to put up with me. It is about this trouble in Orlac."

Beverley waved his visitor to a chair.

"Well, what about it?"

"They are very upset at the War Office, especially the department in which you and I are interested. They are terrified lest the agitation in the country might mean delay in shipments from the mine."

"I don't see why it should," Beverley pointed out. "We are still working up to capacity and we are delivering all that we promised. You know that yourself, sir, or rather you could know if you cared to look through the entries at the office."

"Anyhow," Lord Portington continued, "Appleby says he must see you at once. They told him here that you were out of town and Martin refused to say when you would be back. In Gracechurch Street they were even more mysterious. I myself, as you know, had no information whatever. Where have you been all day?"

"Very busy," was the curt reply. "Very busy indeed. I am going to be busy for a few days. As a matter of fact, I am going abroad."

"Abroad? Does Ursula know?"

"Don't bother about Ursula and me just now, sir," Beverley begged. "I know what Appleby wants to see me about. I rather hoped I should have slipped away before he got the wind up. However, as it is I must see him. Where is he?"

"He is at the Carlton Club now waiting for a phone message from me."

Beverley sighed.

"All right, I will come round there with you or you can telephone him that I shall be there in ten minutes."

"I will take you round," Portington decided. "I am glad you are being reasonable about this, Nigel. As to going abroad just now—why, it's nonsense!"

Beverley made no reply. He lit a cigarette and rang for Martin.

"Have all my luggage and your own things ready, Martin," he said. "I shall be back in half an hour."

"We shall be going to Croydon, sir?" the man asked.

"No, to Heston."

"At what time—"

"Never mind about that," his master interrupted. "Just wait until I am back and have everything in readiness. You can take down the names of anyone who telephones but you know nothing."

"Very good, sir."

Portington had a great deal to say in the car but his companion sat by his side in silence. At the last moment, however, he was obliged to answer a very direct question.

"Nigel, there is one thing I must ask you," his companion insisted. "Is there anything wrong between you and Ursula?"

"Nothing at all," Beverley answered as the car drew up. "Everything between us is perfectly all right. It has been wrong for the last few months but it is all right now. You can ask Ursula. She will tell you all about it."

"I am much relieved," Portington admitted. "And now for Appleby."

CHAPTER XV

The Right Honourable Viscount Appleby, joint Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and probably at that moment the most important person in Great Britain, greeted Beverley in friendly fashion.

"Ran him to ground at last," Portington remarked. "I'll leave you to it."

"If you don't mind," the minister agreed.

The latter waited until the door of the Strangers' Room was closed; then he insisted on Beverley's taking an easy chair and lighting a cigarette.

"We are worried, Beverley," he confided. "I had to send for you. What I am going to say must be considered absolutely secret. When I say that, it is not a figure of speech; our censors would know what to do with any reports we objected to, but we don't even want a word of gossip."

Beverley nodded.

"I quite understand."

"I am speaking to you not as a Cabinet minister," Appleby continued, "but as chairman of the United Defence Committee. We are obtaining from you at the present moment something like a hundred tons a week of a certain material which we will not name which comes from your mine at Klast."

Beverley assented with a nod.

"Our contract with you," Appleby went on, "demands that you supply no one else with this material. You are keeping to that?"

"Absolutely. No one else has had an ounce. No contract with anyone else exists."

"I hate long-winded speeches," Appleby proceeded. "You and I are both business men, Beverley. This material we obtain from you, blended with magnesium, makes the most perfect aluminium in the world. It is unique. It is worth anything to us. The Germans have kept their laboratories going day and night to find a substitute. They cannot find it. They have been getting behind with their coverings for all their new range of aeroplanes. Suddenly, without any announcement in the papers, without any fuss, the greatest firm in Germany—you know which I mean—has accepted an enormous contract from their Government for planes, in which it is stipulated that this particular material shall be used. Have you any explanation to offer?"

"No direct explanation, sir," Beverley replied. "I shall tell you the facts. You can form your own judgment. We hold a concession from the King giving us possession of all the territory on which the Klast Mine is situated. That concession was necessary first because it was Crown Land, the personal property of King Nicolas. Further than that, we hold a charter from the House of Assembly giving us the sole right to work the mine we have established. We pay so much to the King, we pay so much to Parliament. We have not been a single day behind with either payment. There has been a rumour that bauxite has been discovered in another part of the kingdom. I am going to Orlac—at two o'clock to-morrow morning my plane leaves Heston—to investigate it. I do not believe the rumour but even if I did, it would take anyone two years to build another plant in the country of Orlac or anywhere else, to deal with the bauxite and the special processes required. Therefore the contract you speak of could not be carried out with bauxite which had not been drawn from an already established mine."

"Then how is this contract with the German Government to be kept by the firm who have entered into it?" Appleby asked.

"There is only one way, sir," Beverley replied. "There is a political crisis in Orlac, as I don't need to tell you, of course. The Premier who signed our charter has resigned. Elections are now taking place. It is likely that there will be a new premier. The only possible explanation of that contract you have spoken of is that the Germans have been conducting a secret course of propaganda in Orlac, bribing with both hands, and that they will be able to induce the new premier, whoever he is, to withdraw our charter, the King to cancel the concession and the Government to confiscate the mine."

"Very clearly put, Beverley. And so?"

"The charter was given legally to a British company," Beverley continued. "The mine at Klast is owned and worked with British capital. If confiscation were attempted the company would appeal to you, sir. We should ask you to resist an illegal action towards your subjects and insist upon the mine being left in the possession of its legal owners."

Appleby nodded understandingly but very gravely.

"That might mean war," he said.

"It would be a more likely and reasonable basis for war than any of these scares we have heard of for a long time, sir," Beverley agreed.

"You have already received a visit from our Minister to Orlac," Appleby remarked.

"Sir Walter Harding called upon me yesterday, sir. There was nothing I could say. His visit was, I gather, more one of preliminaries. You have asked me for the whole truth and I have given it to you. We have a capital of three million pounds, the whole of which, practically, is held by British shareholders. I cannot believe for a moment that any English Government, apart from what its own interests might be, would permit them to be robbed."

Lord Appleby was silent for a few moments.

"I take it, then, Beverley," he continued, "that you have had no news whatever as regards this contract having been made by the German Government."

"Certainly not," Beverley replied. "All that I know is that Germans have been in Orlac and are there now, working to disorganise the country and to bring about the state of affairs of which you have spoken. A private company such as ours has very few resources on which it can rely to deal with such a situation, but as I have already told you, sir, I am leaving for Orlac within a few hours. I hate war as much as any human being could possibly hate it and I shall do everything I can not to put you in the position of having to use force to protect our interests."

"With regard to this reported discovery of bauxite elsewhere," Appleby asked, "have your firm taken any steps?"

"We only heard of it about a fortnight ago," Beverley declared. "Since then I have obtained a concession from the King in case any further supply of bauxite should be found upon his lands, and a promise in writing that he will grant no charter to anyone except our company. Furthermore, he has given me a document guaranteeing his influence with the new Prime Minister, if there should be a change, to preserve the amenities of the present mine and to grant no privileges to any other company."

"You have certainly acted promptly," the minister conceded.

"In our small way," Beverley continued, "we have done our best to meet guile with guile. We have made presents in various directions which it is as well for you to know nothing of. All the same, the presents have been made and the signatures granted."

"Do you believe that the King will stand firm against the Government if they should come to loggerheads?" Appleby asked.

"I lunched with His Majesty to-day," Beverley confided. "I am not wholly convinced that he is an honest man, especially since I have discovered that he later kept an appointment with the German who has been doing the underground work in Orlac."

"Notwithstanding the fact that he has accepted a present from you, Beverley, on behalf of your company?"

"Notwithstanding that fact, sir."

"What will be your course of action, Beverley, when you arrive in Orlac?" Lord Appleby enquired.

"It will depend entirely upon the course of the election. If the Left Wing get in, I shall do my best to make friends with the incoming Premier. If I fail, and of course if we receive any official intimation that our charter is to be terminated, I shall have to lay the situation before you."

Appleby was silent for several moments.

"I am glad to have had this talk with you, Beverley," he said. "I have, at any rate, a complete grasp of the situation now and, so far as you have gone, I approve of everything. I am sure that you are making every human effort to keep the mine in your own hands and to prevent any other similar enterprise being started, and what I am going to say is perhaps unnecessary—but I shall say it all the same. If secret service money is required for dealing with these people, and it is no good being blind to the fact that there are people who cannot be dealt with any other way, you can rely upon us as being at your back and if you are able to pull this through and keep clear of trouble, there is nothing personal you could ask of the Government which it would not be happy to grant. You understand me, I am sure."

"Perfectly. I can only say, sir, that I am exceedingly obliged."

"You will join me in a whisky-and-soda before you go?" Lord Appleby begged.

"If you would excuse me, sir, I would be glad. I dined late and I still have a little work to do before I start off. If I have any news other than what Sir Walter Harding sends you I will communicate through him, and I would suggest, sir, that if you have any special instructions for me you send them to the Consulate in Klast."

Appleby walked with him as far as the steps of the club. On the way back to the smoking-room, he met Portington and paused for a moment.

"I congratulate you, Portington," he said, "upon your future son-in-law. I think young Beverley is one of the most straightforward and plain-spoken business men I have ever been brought into touch with. Sort of fellow we could find room for in politics."

"I'm afraid, sir," Portington commented, "we could not spare him from Gracechurch Street."

"I told him," Appleby continued, dropping his voice a little as the two men passed across the hall, "that if he could keep us out of this trouble in Orlac and still supply us with what v/e need from the mine, he would stand very high up in that Government list we refer to in times of celebrations. You and I might have to put our heads together about that."

Portington nodded somewhat grimly. He had just had a telephone conversation with Ursula, who had up till then kept her own counsel, which was to say the least of it disturbing. Still, he was an optimist by nature and he remembered that Beverley had made no reference to that unfortunate little incident at the Germanic.

"Glad you think well of him, Appleby," he said. "He has brains. There is another thing about him, too. He knows when to speak and he knows when to keep silent."

"I wish there were more like him amongst my followers," the minister remarked a trifle sadly as the two men parted.

There were very few loiterers in Leopold Street when punctually at five minutes past twelve Marya Mauranesco made her appearance walking slowly down the entry followed by Suka, who had a bundle under either arm. Beverley stepped out on to the pavement to meet her.

"You are marvellously punctual," he said, taking the violin case from her. "Will you step in, please? It is a fine night. Would it be agreeable for Suka to ride with the chauffeur in front?"

"She will like it," Marya replied. "She complains always of the lack of air."

They drove off. In the semi-obscurity of the car Beverley, watching his companion closely, fancied that he saw some slight change in her expression. The restlessness of earlier in the evening seemed to have gone. There was a reposeful look about her sensitive mouth and her finely drawn features.

"You have beautiful possessions," she observed, sinking back amongst the cushions.

"Material things are easy to arrive at," Beverley said. "They form, though, a very unimportant part of life."

"Is the plane you have bought as wonderful as this?"

"It is larger than I needed," he told her. "There is not so much luxury about planes, of course, but it is the best one can buy of its sort. Someday, perhaps you will fly with me."

She looked up at him. There was something a little different in her eyes, in that quick movement, in the faint unsteadiness of her question.

"That has come into your mind," she asked, "just lately—yes? You would like to take me with you sometime in your plane?"

"I should like it very much," he assured her. "These are stormy days and I am going on a difficult journey, Marya Mauranesco, or I might perhaps try and tell you how much."

The smile lingered upon her lips. For a time she said nothing. Beverley himself felt curiously tongue-tied. It was not until they reached the corner of her street that she spoke again.

"What you said just now I like," she told him. "I am glad that you did not have it in your mind to go away to Orlac and never see or think of me again..."

They drew up outside the tall building. Beverley stepped out and assisted her to alight.

"You v/ill wish me luck?" he said, holding out his hand.

"Wait!" she cried. "I ask you something, if you please. You wait here for me for five minutes? I come out and make you my farewells. Five minutes, please?"

"Certainly," he agreed. "I will wait with pleasure."

Suka curtsied to him from the pavement. They disappeared. In rather less than the five minutes Marya Mauranesco returned. She was carrying the small bag she had brought with her on that first visit to his office. Behind her was Suka, who proceeded to re-ensconce herself in the comfortable place by the side of the chauffeur. Beverley glanced at her in surprise. He half-rose to his feet, but the girl waved him back. She sank into the place by his side.

"If you please," she begged, "you must not be angry. I shall ask you to be very kind to Suka and to me. We shall be grateful always."

"But what is it that you want?" he asked her. "I thought you were coming back alone just to say one word of farewell. I have been asking myself what that one word would be."

"I have come back," she explained, "but I do not wish to say farewell. We are coming with you to Orlac."

CHAPTER XVI

Some thirty hours later Marya Mauranesco and Nigel Beverley sat side by side on the steps of their grey, beautifully shaped plane. Silent now, it still seemed to be quivering from its flight over the mountains. A few yards away, their pilot was enjoying a stroll around the grassy slope and the relief of a long-desired cigarette. There were other shadowy figures about the place, mechanics in blue and tan uniforms, gathered mostly in the neighbourhood of this stranger from the skies which had swept down upon them with such scanty warning. The aerodrome itself was crude. There were a dozen hangars, most of them empty. There were zinc-roofed workmen's dwellings, a patch of allotment gardens. Those, however, were all nearly half a mile away. From the plateau which formed the main landing ground and in the middle of which Beverley's plane had made a perfect descent, there sloped a marvellous amphitheatre of gorgeous country—pine forests, a glittering river, a mist-topped range of hills, and beyond them wonderful mountains whose peaks faded into the clouds. Immediately below them was the city; and although from this distance it had a certain picturesque charm and outline, no one had ever claimed that Klast in itself was beautiful. The steward of the plane brought them steaming coffee, and rolls, fresh milk and butter from a farmhouse close at hand. He brought also a woman still young but with deep lines in her brown, weather-worn face. She wore a faded scarlet shawl round her shoulders and a queerly shaped skirt. She entered at once into conversation in her own language with Marya. Beverley listened for a moment idly, then he looked away across the tree-tops towards the town and over the town to the fruitful country on the other side. He was conscious of a sense of peace, at once deep and restful. He had slept for hours through the wild journey, without relief to his tired brain. Here in the sweet yet bracing atmosphere, which seemed filled with the perfume of flowers and the dreamy morning wind, he felt rested. It was an enterprise, even for the pilot, this flight in a new machine to this place. It was a strange feeling, too, that Marya, so quiet, so silent and yet so curiously stimulating, had slept peacefully a few yards away all through their journey and was there now by his side, perfectly calm, perfectly content, more desirable than any woman into whose eyes he had ever looked.

"She has news of what is going on in the city?" he asked her when the woman, with a clumsy curtsy, had left them.

"She does not know much," Marya explained. "Up here we are still eleven miles from Klast. She has been there, she tells me, four times in her life. She lives in their two fields and in her poultry yard. Her man has been summoned to the army. Months may pass, she says, before she sees or hears from him again. She is very happy because of the three pieces of silver you gave me for her. I think she has never sold milk at such a price before."

Beverley, who was thinking of the huge cities over which they had passed and the almost fierce examination of their passports and the storm of questions which assailed them at the German frontier during the staccato hour of the only pause in their flight, smiled as he looked around him.

"Did you ask her about the time the officials are likely to turn up?"

"To turn up?" she repeated thoughtfully.

"To arrive, to ask for and examine our passports and to know what our business is in Klast."

"Oh, yes," she told him. "That will be very soon. There is a big motor lorry which arrives every morning at eight o'clock. It will be here soon. Very few planes, the woman said, ever stop here. Sometimes they pass over. Very seldom they descend."

The pilot threw away his cigarette and approached them. He doffed his cap to Marya.

"Since the young lady speaks the language, sir," he said to Beverley, "perhaps she was able to get some information from the woman."

"The officials will be here presently," Beverley announced. "I have only been here once before and then they talked of building a funicular up here, and a motor road. They seem, however, to have abandoned the idea."

"No garage, nothing of that sort?" the man asked.

"There is a store of petrol here and plenty of oil in that stone building, but it is all locked up. The officials will be here at eight o'clock. There is excellent coffee, and cold ham, if you want it, which the steward has just produced, and fresh milk. Better get into the salon and have some breakfast."

The man climbed the steps and disappeared. Beverley pointed out to Marya the little pine-topped hill on the right-hand side of the enclosure.

"There is a path there," he said. "We shall be able to see the whole road to Klast."

She walked by his side across the soft springy turf starred here and there with wild flowers.

"I could see this place," she told him, "from the convent. I used to watch them building this terrible aerodrome. Sister Georgina, when she looked this way, had always tears in her eyes. She was one who feared the coming of the outside world. The slightest event in any way not usual disturbed her. She prayed night and day always for peace."

"And you?" he asked curiously.

"I grew to be like her," Marya confessed. "I, too, came to fear the invasion of life. I have fear of it now. I have seen so little of the world, Mr. Beverley. I think it is an ugly-place."

"And the Sister Superior," he asked, "has she ever left Klast?"

"She left when she was the age that I am now," Marya confided. "She was even younger. I have seen a picture of her painted by an artist who lived in Klast for many years. She was beautiful. She was like a flower. She had the sweetest mouth and eyes that one ever saw. In her room there are still copies of nearly

all the Madonnas of the Renaissance. There is one artist who took his wife always for his model. She was like that."

"And now?"

"She is beautiful still," Marya continued gravely, "but oh, so different! Her hair is white; she found no happiness anywhere in the cities of the world. I just remember her return. It was terrible to see her at first, but it was beautiful to watch her growing more peaceful and contented all the time in our gardens or in the chapel listening to the music. One thing she had learned out in the world was the care of flowers. She taught all that she knew to us. Each one of us worked every day and each one of us was supposed to be devoted to one particular flower. I had beautiful lilies in my garden. Perhaps some day I shall be permitted to show them to you."

"What do you mean by that?" he asked, smiling down at her.

"We have not spoken of it," she said quietly, "but I am going to live with Sister Georgina. I think it will make her happy to have me. I have seen nothing in life of which I am not afraid."

They had reached the top of the hill. She passed a little in advance of him and pointed from the summit down towards some wooded slopes overlooking the city.

"Through the trees," she went on, "you could see little glimpses of the convent. The trees have grown now and of the building you can see nothing until you are there. To the right, where there is an open space, you can see the small chapel. It is beyond that where our gardens are. You see the wall?"

"I do indeed," he answered.

"It has many names. No one has ever been known to climb it. It is many feet high and they say that the iron spikes, scarcely one of which is missing, are nearly a thousand years old. The first name—'The Ring of Peace'—is the one I like best. There are two gates only. One is where I am pointing," she told him, leaning a little forward. "That is 'The Gate of Entrance.' There is a house there where the portress and two others live. The other is called 'The Gate of Departure.' It is behind the convent and out of sight. Then there is a building like a church outside both gates," she went on, swinging a little round. "That is where the young women come day by day for instruction. It is there that I went every day to learn languages, geography, history...It has its private chapel, but it is not the real chapel. That is in the convent enclosure."

"It is very beautiful," Beverley said. "Show me now the rest of the city—the King's palace, the House of Assembly."

She turned away and it seemed to Beverley that her eyes left with reluctance those wooded and secret places in which the convent was hidden.

"That is the King's palace, in the heart of the town," she pointed out. "It is of white stone, very large, not very beautiful. There is the House of Assembly, on the other side of the square. There is no question of beauty there. That is ugly. If your eyes are good, and I think they are, you can see something crawling along the boulevard. It is one of the new electric cars."

"I see it," he admitted.

"There," she went on, her finger directed towards the bare-topped hills on the right, "is your mine. You can see the shafts. At night-time sometimes you can see the flames. A mile away you can feel the heat. All those buildings which look like rings of great mushrooms are the tenement houses built for the miners."

Beverley looked up at them thoughtfully.

"The mine is at work now," he remarked. "I can see the smoke."

"It is at work always night and day," she told him.

"What is that?" he asked, pointing down the rough road towards an ascending vehicle immediately below them. It seemed to him that she shivered a little. Without a doubt she moved nearer to him. A sudden flash of pleasant consciousness seemed to tell him that it was an instinctive search for protection.

"It is the officials of the town," she told him in a half-whisper. "There are gendarmes and the guardians of the aerodrome. We shall have to go back with them in that lorry. Suka will be very happy. Her brother is a gendarme. Sometimes on fete days she goes with him to town."

Her eyes seemed to have become a little dilated as she looked down at the clumsy vehicle which was being laboriously driven up the precipitous ascent.

"Are you happy to be near home again, Marya?" he asked her.

She remained silent. Slowly she turned away from him.

"We must meet them," she said. "I have never been to the Flying Station before but there is a douane as well."

He followed her down the narrow path. They reached the edge of the wood within hearing of the vehicle which now, however, was out of sight. Beverley suddenly checked her progress.

"Please tell me, Marya Mauranescu," he begged. "I have brought you here safely because you asked me to do so. Whether I was wise or not I do not know. What do you propose to do? How is it that you wish to live? You cannot seriously mean that you are going to live at the convent on the other side of the walls."

The sweet full lips trembled a little. She suddenly raised her eyes to his—a very unusual action on her part. He saw clearly into their depths. He realised now for the first time something of the struggle which was going on, the disquietude which had crept into her being.

"Behind the walls I may not go yet," she explained softly. "I shall live there outside the great gates until Sister Georgina takes me in. That will come someday. Meanwhile I shall see my brother. I shall hear what he has to tell me. I shall have my own little cell in the outer house. As the summer goes on I shall leave my door open and when our own dreary little evening service is over I shall hear the singing at vesper-time in the chapel. Then the lights will gleam out in the city. I shall hear the footsteps and the voices a long distance away, and nearer still I shall smell the flowers in the garden. Then our music will cease. The stars will come out, and if the wind is from the south I shall hear the tinkling of guitars at the cafes, people's footsteps upon the pavement, the quiver of their laughter. You see," she concluded, "when one is outside the gates one is between the two worlds. It is so that one is taught to think for oneself. I must just live out my period of waiting."

There was a further series of explosions from the rough road below. The lorry turned in at the gate and came to a standstill. One by one its inmates descended. The air was full of exclamations as they raised their arms and pointed to the newly arrived plane, a glittering, beautiful sight. A young man in military uniform suddenly detached himself from the group. He came swiftly across towards them.

Beverley knew in a moment who he was. He was conscious at one and the same time of the fact that this was quite one of the most beautiful human beings he had ever seen and that it was Marya's brother.

CHAPTER XVII

The young man greeted his sister with a joyful deference which seemed to Beverley dignified yet charming. Perhaps out of respect for the presence of a stranger, he spoke to her in English.

"So you have dropped from the clouds of heaven, dear Marya!" he exclaimed. "You join once more the angels of earth. I offer you the salutations of a very ordinary human being."

His lips touched her cheeks lightly on either side. He held her away from him and looked at her thoughtfully.

"But these few weeks have made a difference," he went on. "You are no longer a schoolgirl."

Marya maintained her air of perfect gravity. If the meeting had brought her any pleasure she successfully concealed it.

"This is Mr. Nigel Beverley," she said, "who has brought me here in his beautiful plane. Mr. Beverley, this is my brother Rudolph Mauranesco."

The young man saluted in military fashion. Afterwards he held out his hand. His smile was good-natured, his tone cordial.

"I welcome you, Mr. Beverley," he declared. "You are a great benefactor of my country. I thank you for having given my sister this marvellous experience. You have come, I suppose, to see that your mine is still tearing the bauxite out of the earth at Klast."

"I have come to have a look round," Beverley admitted. "I hear that things are a little unsettled over here."

Rudolph ignored the remark. He extended his hand towards the little group by whom they were surrounded.

"My companions," he explained, "are all officials of the place. Gentlemen, this is Mr. Nigel Beverley who is responsible for the prosperity of our city. He is the president of the company who own the Klast Mine."

There was a great deal of handshaking and of guttural salutation which sounded to Beverley, with his scant comprehension of the language, as though he had found his way into a parrot house. He was led away into the bureau, his papers were examined, everything that should be countersigned was countersigned. The dozen officials—some of them in marvellously shabby uniforms, others in strangely cut clothes and hats which looked as though they had come from the ready-made department of some London or New York outfitter—had nothing but compliments to offer. The customs official smiled longingly at Beverley's beautifully packed suitcases but refused to examine anything. It was only when he caught sight of a box of cigars that a covetous gleam shone for a moment in his eyes. Beverley opened it at once. The man spoke a little French.

"Try one of these," the former invited. "I am not a great smoker of cigars but you will agree with me that they were too good to leave behind."

There was a further exchange of courtesies, after which Beverley's half-empty box was returned to its place. Marya had drawn her brother a little on one side and whispered in his ear. He nodded and came across to Beverley.

"My sister was afraid that you would have to descend in this awful vehicle," he said. "Nothing of the sort. Your coming is already known in the city and has excited much interest. We have not a great many modern cars in the place, but the one which awaits you belongs to our principal garage and was purchased from His Majesty King Nicolas a year ago. It is not bad of its kind. If agreeable, my sister, you and myself will descend in it and your baggage can follow afterwards. It is agreed?"

He took consent for granted and led the way to the limousine, which was a little out-of-date but still flaunted the royal arms on the panels. Marya gave a few brief instructions to Suka and entered the vehicle. Beverley found himself by her side and the young man faced them. His smile disclosed a set of dazzling teeth. He had the lofty forehead and the classic features of a young Roman Emperor of bygone ages. His carriage, too, was that of a race of rulers.

"It would have made me very happy, Mr. Beverley," he said, leaning forward, "if I had been able to offer you the hospitality of the Mauranesco palace, but, alas, it is no longer in my hands. To tell you the truth, it has been turned into a block of flats. The most comfortable suite, however, at the hotel is prepared for you. Further than that we cannot go."

"The hotel is the only possible place," Marya said quietly. "The palace of which my brother speaks consists now of workmen's dwellings except for the two rooms in the attic which we were permitted to occupy, and which have been left for my habitation in case I returned."

The young man shrugged his shoulders.

"My sister speaks the truth, I fear," he admitted. "Still, one likes to express one's regrets. I know something of Western luxury, Mr. Beverley. I was at Oxford for two terms. I had a flat in Mayfair for two months. I know something of Paris. All this was before the crash."

"We never had any money," Marya said. "What we spent belonged to others. With it we spent also our hopes."

Mauranesco turned to Beverley. His beautifully-shaped eyebrows were slightly contracted.

"My sister looks sadly upon life," he confided. "You can tell that when you hear her talk. She would be gay but she has not the gaiety of spirit. Trouble oppresses and defeats her. With me it is different. I see hope everywhere—especially at the present moment. My sister has paid you a business visit, has she not, Mr. Beverley?"

"She has indeed," was the swift response. "Tell me, did that fragment of rock she showed me come from property which belongs to you?"

The young man smiled with the air of one whose mind was fixed upon happy things.

"You shall be told all about that presently, Mr. Beverley," he promised. "You were a wise man to come here. There are others who wish to talk to me about that piece of rock. I tell them 'No.' England is the greatest country in the world. The Klast Mine belongs to England. It is Mr. Beverley who has brought prosperity to Orlac. It is our duty to remember it."

"That sounds very fair," Beverley acknowledged.

"It is a matter of honour," the other declared.

"I have undertaken this journey," Beverley continued, "partly to make a few enquiries into the political condition of your country and partly on the subject of this reported discovery of bauxite in the northern part of the kingdom. Your sister did not know where the fragment which she showed me was found. You can tell me all about it, of course. Was it on Crown Lands?"

The young man shook his head.

"Oh, no."

"Was it on land belonging to you?"

Mauranesco seemed a little pained.

"Certainly it was," he replied. "My family have owned the whole ridge of hills where it was discovered for many generations."

"Is it far from Klast?"

"In this car and in good weather it can be reached in three hours."

"Are you willing to allow the geologist I have attached to the Klast Mine to inspect the property?"

The young man was mildly dubious.

"Would that be necessary, sir?" he asked. "Bauxite is unmistakable. You yourself must be well acquainted with its appearance."

"Perhaps I am," Beverley acknowledged, "but it is necessary, in order to estimate its value, to examine it in the crude state to see exactly how it has come into being."

Mauranesco's expression rather resembled the pout of a beautiful but discontented child.

"The more people who know about this," he explained, "the greater the difficulty in dealing with it from the commercial point of view. I shall do everything I can to please you, though, Mr. Beverley. My sister has spoken to me most touchingly of your kindness to her."

Beverley glanced towards Marya. There was not a sign upon her face that she was even listening. He turned again to his opposite neighbour.

"Tell me," he asked, "does Herr Treyer know yet where this piece of rock was found?"

The young man's start was almost dramatic.

"Treyer?"

"That may be only an assumed name," Beverley went on, "but it is the name under which he is known at the present moment. He is a German Secret Agent working for his country. He has been to London and I believe to Paris, and he has certainly been over here. I understood that you had had conversations with him."

Rudolph Mauranesco appeared a trifle hurt.

"Mr. Beverley," he said, "I see that my sister has not confided to you the humiliating situation in which I have been placed during the last few weeks."

"You mean that you have been in prison?"

"I was the victim of a wicked misunderstanding," the other explained with calm dignity. "I was temporarily confined in a fortress. Fortunately the political upheaval of the last few days has resulted in certain changes amongst the permanent officials. Through that I at once obtained my liberty."

"I understood," Beverley told him, "that you had had conversations with Treyer, and that as a result he had paid visits both to London and Paris."

"You have heard strange things," the young man scoffed. "They are not true. It is with you and you alone that I wish to deal. I have been living since I left the—er—fortress in the remains of an old castle which has belonged for many centuries to my family. Day by day I have walked over my land. I have satisfied myself that we have a great supply of bauxite. I am prepared to start with you this afternoon. If you wish to bring your geologist you can do so, under certain conditions. Otherwise there is my word, the word of a Prince of Mauranesco. The land is there. It is my property. The bauxite is there. You can find for yourself a hundred such specimens as the one my sister took to England. A half-day's climbing in the hills should satisfy you. All that I would add is this: Knowledge of such an immensely important fact is in itself a great danger. We must keep it to ourselves as up till now I have done."

"I am not alone in this matter," Beverley reminded the eager young man. "I have a board of directors to satisfy. It would be better, I am sure, if I brought my expert."

Mauranesco accepted the situation with an air of resignation.

"Everything," he declared, "shall be arranged according to your wishes. The only thing is, there must be no loss of time. We will start this afternoon, if possible. I can only regret that in Klast itself or even when we reach my own property, I cannot offer you the hospitality which a visitor of your position should receive from the head of my House. In plain words, you will have to rough it most terribly."

Then Marya spoke again and Beverley was at once conscious of the change in her. Her voice maintained all its soft qualities but there was something in its timbre entirely different. The warmth had gone from her tone. If such a thing had been reasonable one might have imagined that there was contempt behind her words.

"I have already explained our unfortunate position to Mr. Beverley, Rudolph," she said. "He will not expect hospitality of any sort from us."

"It is regrettable," the young man sighed. "Nevertheless," he went on, with the air of one who has a happy idea, "you will give me the pleasure, Mr. Beverley, of lunching with me at the hotel?"

"Delighted," Beverley assented.

"Neither the accommodation nor the food," Rudolph continued, "are what you have been accustomed to, but to me, after the fortress—"

"Prison," Marya corrected him quietly.

Her brother looked shocked.

"Marya!" he expostulated.

"I am under great obligation to Mr. Beverley," she explained with ominous calm. "Nothing would make me happier than that his visit over here should turn out to be successful. It is necessary, however, that he be told the literal truth about everything. I who know nothing of business can see that he will have difficulties to face. We can only help him by seeing that he is not in any way misled."

There was a moment's pause. Rudolph, his eyebrows slightly contracted, glanced smilingly across at Beverley as though appealing for his sympathy.

"I think, sir," he said, "that you have bewitched my sister. I have never before known her to take the faintest interest in serious affairs other than religious ones. I see that I must be very careful in all that I say to you. The tongue slips sometimes. It is an easy habit to acquire. You shall have from me nothing but hard facts strung rigidly together...You observe," he went on in an altered tone and with a wave of his hand towards the town which they were approaching, "that Klast is spreading. The city has outgrown its boundaries. Some of our most ancient buildings are being sacrificed—beautiful though they were. This is what takes their place."

Beverley glanced at the tall blocks of modern flats fashioned of the inevitable concrete slabs which lined one side of the road and murmured a word or two of sympathy.

"In time to come," Rudolph continued, "this will all be changed. The city has been poverty-stricken for many years—and not only the city, but the Government of the whole country. It is the taxes from your mine which are filling the empty coffers; but, alas, not fast enough. There is a strong communistic party in the House. All the time they clamour for progress, more comfort for the people, more schools."

"It is reasonable," Beverley observed.

Rudolph shook his head. His agile and shapely fingers had during the last few seconds been rolling some tobacco in a strip of paper. He began to smoke.

"These are Western ideas," he declared. "I myself am more of an artist. I would like to see the boulevards widened and improved where the houses have been pulled down, trees planted, public gardens arranged for, a State-endowed hotel and opera house. Your money is pouring into Klast, bringing it all the time prosperity. Soon, either from you or from other countries, this fresh discovery of bauxite will bring even greater wealth. Lavaroko was a man of broad enough sympathies but he has been, temporarily at any rate, deposed. What will happen should the Left Wing win this election no one can tell."

They passed the royal palace, an impressive-looking building although most of the windows were curtained and the place had an uninhabited appearance. Then they swung round into the square and pulled up outside the hotel, a large but ordinary-looking structure of red brick. The ground floor was wholly devoted to a large café which extended onto the pavement. A row of rather tired-looking shrubs in huge pots bordered the kerb.

"You would wish, I am sure, my dear Marya," her brother suggested, "to make your way at once to the convent. Sister Georgina is expecting you."

Marya took Beverley's hand and stepped lightly onto the crude pavement.

"Before I go to the convent," she said, "I have a debt which must be discharged."

"A debt?" Rudolph repeated.

"Of gratitude to Mr. Beverley," she explained. "In order to discharge it I wish to understand something of this very difficult situation before I leave altogether the life of the city."

Rudolph seemed a little perplexed, almost distressed. He passed his arm affectionately through his sister's, a dignified but not unfriendly gesture. She freed herself at once.

"Surely," he remonstrated, "you can leave the matter of entertaining Mr. Beverley and doing all that is possible for him in my hands?"

Their eyes met. Rudolph's question was curiously yet not unpleasantly asked. There was something, however, significantly unresponsive in his sister's silence. The three walked up the hotel steps together. The manager, with many bows, presented himself to Beverley. From the background an obvious Englishman came forward and greeted the latter warmly.

"My name is Underwood, sir," he announced. "I daresay you remember me. I am Mr. Marstan's private secretary."

"I remember you quite well," Beverley replied. "I rather thought that Mr. Marstan would have been here himself or at the flying ground to meet me."

"He sent me to explain," Underwood apologised. "The fact of it is, things are so unsettled that he thinks it best not to leave the mine at present."

"What is this about Hayter?" Beverley enquired. "Been getting into trouble of some sort, hasn't he?"

"Nobody knows very much about it, sir," Underwood confided, drawing his chief a little on one side. "It seems that he became embroiled in some disturbance here one night recently. There was a row at the principal cafe and for a Scotsman Hayter is very short-tempered, as you may remember. Anyhow, he was arrested, taken to prison and he is there now. He was brought into Court and simply remanded."

"What sort of disturbance was it?"

Underwood looked round once more cautiously.

"This place reeks of spies, Mr. Beverley," he said. "There's a queer sort of underground whispering going on throughout the whole city and this hotel is the centre of it all. No one knows what has happened to Hayter except that he is in prison and Mr. Marstan has been refused permission to see him. We have simply been told that a charge of espionage is pending against him."

"Rather unusual situation, isn't it?" Beverley remarked, frowning.

"Conditions are all unusual, sir," the young man proceeded eagerly. "You probably know nothing about it because the chief and I both believe that our cables to you in England have been censored or stopped altogether at the post office. This place is in a turmoil politically. The communists, or Left Wing, as they call themselves, have turned the Government out on the question of the distribution of the royalties from the mine. We believe that Hayter has been put out of the way because he is the only practical geologist in the country."

Beverley listened without change of countenance. There was to be a battle, then, a battle with unseen, unknown enemies. His face hardened although a grim little smile parted his lips.

"This is very interesting. Underwood," he said.

Marya had sunk into a chair at the other end of the stone-paved hall. Her brother was leaning over her talking earnestly. Underwood, with a slight gesture, pointed him out.

"That is one of the young Orlacians whom we are all beginning to suspect," he said, dropping his voice almost to a whisper. "It was through him that no one from the mine was allowed to use the military route up to the aerodrome this morning and I was obliged to await you down here."

"I do not intrude?" Rudolph asked as he approached hesitatingly. "If you, sir," he went on, addressing Beverley, "have matters to discuss with this gentleman, I will take my sister to the convent and return for lunch."

"There is nothing whatever of privacy in our conversation," Beverley assured him. "It is just a matter of routine connected with the mine. Dull as ditch-water to you, I'm afraid, and quite incomprehensible. I can hear about that later. The suggestion I was about to make," he added, glancing at his watch, "was that although it is a considerable time before the lunch hour I think a small aperitif would be a good idea."

Rudolph smiled happily.

"It will be my great pleasure," he said, "to show you the way to what we call our American Bar and to drink with you to your safe arrival in this country."

"Your sister—" Beverley began, looking over his shoulder.

"My sister's attendant has arrived," Rudolph interrupted, pointing out Suka's lumbering approach up the hotel steps. "Marya will be quite safe now in her hands."

Beverley hesitated. Suka had already taken up her place behind her mistress' chair.

"Should I be asking too much of you if I begged that your sister might be included in your luncheon invitation?" he suggested. "I have not yet had the opportunity of making my adieux. The message which I have just received makes it necessary for me to pay a call in the town immediately."

"It shall be as you wish, Mr. Beverley," Rudolph acquiesced. "It is now half-past ten. We will have our drink and meet here again at twelve-thirty. My sister shall be invited to join us."

"Capital!"

"You will visit us this morning, sir?" Underwood asked anxiously.

"Certainly," Beverley replied. "I won't fix a time but I will come sometime to-day."

The young man took his leave. Beverley looked through the open door of the hotel, attracted by some shouting in the street.

"We will see what is exciting the people at this early hour," Rudolph observed. "The bar is to be reached from outside more easily."

They stood on the steps looking out. Traffic in the streets seemed suspended. The loiterers were all gazing up at the palace. On the roof a steeplejack was fixing a ladder against the flagpost. Rudolph's face grew suddenly serious.

"The King," he said almost under his breath. "See, they are painting the flagstaff. The flag is there rolled up ready to be hoisted."

The hotel manager came smilingly up to them.

"It is good news, Mr. Beverley," he announced. "Good news for us all. The King returns within a few days—perhaps to-morrow. The palace is to be opened."

CHAPTER XVIII

Beverley, whose card and request for an interview with the chief of the police seemed to create a certain amount of commotion at the grey stone building with its sombre front almost immediately opposite the hotel, was finally ushered into a large, barely furnished apartment on the second floor. The sole occupant of the place, who was seated at a desk surrounded by the stubs of cigars, looked up at his entrance and glanced once more at the card. He was stout, and florid of feature, with closely trimmed grey hair; and the tunic of his uniform was negligently open.

"What is your business with me, sir?" he asked in gutturally spoken but quite comprehensible French.

"My name is Beverley. I come from England. I am one of the proprietors of the Klast Mine. You, I believe, sir, are General Kara Bavan, Chief of the Police?"

"That is my post," was the somewhat startled reply. "I was informed that your business with me was urgent, Mr. Beverley."

"I have the honour to present to you a message from a mutual acquaintance," the visitor announced, handing over the sheet of hotel notepaper on which Katarina had scrawled those few significant lines.

The General rose to his feet. With the help of an enormous monocle he glanced down the couple of sentences. He had the air of one endeavouring to assume a more amiable expression as he bowed and resumed his place. Certainly there was a complete change in his tone and manner.

"Pray sit down, Mr. Beverley," he invited. "The gracious lady who honours me with those few lines requests that I render you any service possible during your visit to the city. What can I do for you?"

"One of my employees at our offices here seems to have got into trouble," Beverley explained. "He is, as a matter of fact, in prison. So far as I can understand no definite charge has been made against him and there is a good deal of mystery as to what his offence may have been. I ask your permission, General, to visit him and I am venturing to go even further than that and to request that as I am in urgent need of his services he be released at once."

The General added one more to the stubs of extinct cigars and disposed of the whole small trayful by throwing them into the great open fireplace.

"I know the man you mean, Mr. Beverley," he admitted. "A charge was certainly made against him. He created a disturbance in a cafe, and in a public place he criticised severely some of our institutions. I think that you will agree with me, sir, that this is not wise behaviour in a strange city."

"It is most unlike my employee," Beverley declared, "and I might venture to remind you, General, that the charge has yet to be investigated."

"What position does he hold with your firm?" the latter asked.

"He is our geologist in chief," Beverley replied. "I wish to take him with me on a certain expedition to another part of the kingdom to investigate a report that bauxite is to be found there."

The General, after a brief search, found in one of his drawers a crumpled sheet of blank notepaper. On the point of signing his name to the few lines he had scrawled, he paused with the pen still in his hand.

"You are willing to hold yourself responsible for the behaviour of this person, Mr. Beverley?" he enquired.

"I certainly am."

"Then I shall go further than giving you permission to see him," the Chief of Police said simply. "Madame seems to wish that you be treated with every consideration. It is done. Your employee is set at liberty."

He added a couple of lines to what he had already written, signed his name with a great splash, folded up the paper and handed it over to Beverley. Then he leaned back in his chair and crossed his pudgy legs.

"What else can I do for you, sir?" he asked.

"You can tell me who is going to win this election and who is to be the next Premier," Beverley suggested with a smile. "Permit me to offer you a cigarette, sir."

The General helped himself from Beverley's case.

"This election is a blasted nuisance," he confided. "Lavaroko should never have resigned. If these fellows on the Left ever get into power, and they might do so this time quite easily, although they have no one but the peasants and the shop people behind them, they might do an enormous amount of damage. Sit down, Mr. Beverley. You are interested in our affairs?"

"Naturally I am," Beverley replied as he accepted the invitation. "My company have three million pounds' worth of English gold sunk in the Klast Mine. Besides that, we have erected some of the most valuable machinery in the world at a great cost."

"Three million pounds is much money," the General acknowledged.

"It is a huge sum to risk in any single enterprise. Our charter, of course, was signed by Lavaroko, and our concession is from the King, so our position is secure," Beverley pointed out. "At the same time, the kingdom of Orlac has restless neighbours and the establishment of an industry such as ours has created a great deal of jealousy."

The General coughed.

"I know nothing about politics," he said. "I endeavour to keep law and order in the city, my staff of police are able and diligent; but with politics I have nothing to do."

"Quite right," Beverley agreed. "For a high official in your position it would be unwise to interfere."

"You have seen His Majesty lately?"

"Not many hours ago. The day before yesterday I lunched with him in Paris."

"He is in good health, I trust?"

"Excellent. He spoke of having to return almost at once if things did not calm down in the city here."

The General stroked his long moustache thoughtfully.

"His Majesty is always a great responsibility to me," he confided. "Until this election is settled I would a great deal rather he stayed away. If he returns, twenty-five of my best men have to be watching him day by day. If Madame Katarina, the *prima donna* at the opera house here, returns also—and to tell you the truth, sir, the people are clamouring a great deal more for her return than His Majesty's—my responsibilities will be doubled."

"Madame is popular?" Beverley asked.

"The people of Klast have one failing," Kara Bavan sighed. "They are music mad. The opera house was closed when Katarina left for Paris. I honestly believe that if it were opened again to-night half the discontent in the city would be smoothed away."

"Amazing," Beverley murmured.

The General accepted another cigarette.

"You are a young man," he remarked, looking curiously at his visitor, "to hold so important a commercial position."

Beverley smiled.

"I am older than I look, perhaps," he acknowledged. "I am very much interested in your country. General. I am happy to think that I have been the cause of adding so much to its prosperity."

The Chief of Police nodded.

"As I said before," he declared, "I do not interest myself in politics. I keep my men in order. If ever war should come—which heaven forbid—I return to the army as chief of the staff. I am a servant of the King and the State."

"I had the honour of meeting your commander-in-chief when I was over here some years ago," Beverley announced. "His Majesty gave a banquet at the palace. Lavaroko, the Prime Minister, was present, also General Belovar. I trust that I have remembered the name correctly."

"Quite correctly," the other replied. "The General is in the capital at present. He will welcome a call from you at the barracks, I am sure."

"I shall pay my respects before I leave," Beverley promised. "In the meantime. General, I will not take up any more of your time. I thank you for acceding so graciously to our friend's request. I shall go now direct to the prison."

The General coughed. He seemed to be suffering from some slight embarrassment.

"I myself have travelled very little in what would be considered the more civilised countries of the world," he acknowledged, "but I read your magazines and I gather that the prisons in other countries are very much in advance of ours. We Orlacians are, I think I may say, Mr. Beverley, a fine race but we are a trifle crude. Our people have always been a little shy of over-civilised methods and habits. The prison will seem to you a rough sort of place. All I can say is that it is good enough for the criminals we have to house there."

"So long as you don't put me in amongst them," the departing visitor said, smiling and holding out his hand, "I shall not be critical. I wish you once more good morning."

Beverley, ushered out in due form, found his way to the street and, in the same springless victoria drawn by a flea-bitten grey horse which he had engaged at the hotel, he drove off to the prison. They chimbed a long hill with a strange mixture of shops and cafes on one side and a row of trees in the middle of the broad walk on the other. At its summit was a plain stone building standing in the middle of what looked as though it had been at some time or another the playground of a school. Beverley pushed his way through a half-opened gate, passed an empty sentry box, walked up the cement path and came to a sudden standstill. The dejected-looking figure of a middle-aged man shabbily attired was seated upon a bench outside the entrance.

"Hayter!" Beverley exclaimed. "Will Hayter!"

The man looked up and sprang to his feet.

"My God, it's Mr. Beverley!" he cried.

"Will Hayter," Beverley repeated, sitting down by his side. "What the dickens have they been doing to you?"

"Well, they haven't been torturing me or anything of that sort," the man replied, "but my God, I'm glad to see you, sir! I haven't had a wash for a week, the food here is not fit to eat nor the water to drink. They won't charge me with anything but they won't let me go. It's a hell of a country, this. The Minister has gone over to England—I expect you know that. That's their excuse for keeping me here."

Beverley rose to his feet.

"Well, the first thing to be done," he said, "is to get you out of it. Just stay where you are for a few moments, Hayter. I think I shall be able to take you away with me."

Beverley made his way into the interior of the building. It was a dreary-looking place. The walls were of stone and in the great entrance hall dozens of people were sitting about and some children were even playing with a ball. A man in uniform seated behind a desk beckoned to him surlily, and Beverley unfolded and showed him the paper which he had just received. The former saluted as he saw the signature and with a more courteous gesture invited Beverley to follow him. They walked along a corridor for some distance, then the official threw open a door without knocking and entered a crudely furnished untidy-looking office. A bare bench was set against the wall and three rush chairs of uncomfortable appearance were placed behind a long oak table. A man engaged in an angry torrent of mingled abuse and remonstrance was being led away, a policeman on either side of him. Beverley's guide pushed his way past them and spoke to an elderly official in plain clothes who was seated in one of the armchairs. He presented the paper which Beverley had handed to him and indicated Beverley, who was standing in the background. The magistrate read it through and frowned, then with a little start he re-read and passed it on to the man who was seated on his left and was wearing military uniform. They read over the few lines

scrawled by the Chief of Police and talked eagerly for some minutes, looking now and then at Beverley. At last the man in uniform stood up and beckoned him to approach.

"My companion here," he indicated in halting French, "is the magistrate of the Petty Court. You are the Mr. Beverley spoken of in these papers?"

"That is my name," Beverley acquiesced.

The two men both bowed.

"I am a lawyer of Klast," the first one announced. "Major Sigrid here is the governor of the prison. We understand that you have applied for the release of one of our prisoners."

"There has been some little misunderstanding, I think, about my friend," Beverley assured them. "I have known William Hayter for a great many years. He has never been in any sort of trouble but is a highly respectable person. He knows nothing about this country or its politics and he is here on an important mission on behalf of the Klast Mine with which I am connected."

"The Klast Mine," the lawyer repeated in a tone of reverence.

"The mine," the governor of the prison echoed.

The two men talked together earnestly. Beverley, who was beginning to remember a few words of Orlacian from his previous visit, smiled as he caught the gist of their speech. The civilian who had introduced himself as a lawyer presently addressed him.

"The information given against Mr. William Hayter," he said amiably, "came largely from a young man of high birth but indifferent character who was himself an inmate of the prison and who has only been released on bail. Your friend is reported to have indulged in a political tirade in a public place vehemently attacking the Government of this country. Enquiries concerning his character, however, have been quite satisfactory and there has been no other evidence against him. In the face of the letter which we have received from General Kara Bavan, Major Sigrid here suggests that we have no alternative but to release the prisoner as desired. If you are satisfied, Mr. Beverley, you are at liberty to take your friend away. He is at the present moment in the exercise yard."

"I saw him there as I came in," Beverley remarked.

"I will accompany you," Major Sigrid proposed, "and see him out of the gates."

Beverley bowed his acknowledgements, received back his papers, and the two men returned to the prison yard where Hayter was sitting anxiously.

"You speak a little English, perhaps?" Beverley asked his companion.

The latter shook his head regretfully. Beverley turned to his employee.

"Look here, Hayter," he said, "they are perfectly willing to let you go right along with me now. If I were you I should not make a complaint. Anything we want to do in the way of getting compensation we can see about afterwards. The great thing is to get you clear of this place. I want you outside pretty badly."

Hayter hesitated but only for a moment.

"You are quite right, Mr. Beverley," he acknowledged. "There are one or two in this dog kennel I should like to have a word or two with; but as you say, that can come afterwards. I'm ready, sir."

"Mr. Hayter," Beverley said suavely to the governor of the prison, "is ready to believe that there has been some mistake in his arrest. If you will be so kind as to accompany us to the gate so that we can pass your sentinel there we will go at once."

"With much pleasure," the governor assented. "Monsieur Beverley will sign the book in the sentry box."

Beverley did as he was requested and accepted the body of William Hayter. There were farewells—courteous on Beverley's part, a little dubious but florid on the part of the governor of the prison, somewhat dour from Will Hayter. The two men got into the carriage and drove away.

"Where are your clothes?" Beverley asked.

"They will be at the hotel, if they have not been interfered with. I've been living in a single room there because they speak a word or two of English, and their own language is not understandable to a reasonable human being. It's expensive but Mr. Marstan down at the mine he told me not to worry about that. Klast's no' such a dear place after all."

They drove to the hotel, where they found Hayter's things still untouched in the room he had taken. His return was welcomed by the hotel proprietor with much relief. Beverley looked his companion over and pointed to the lift.

"Up you go, Hayter," he directed. "Bath, shave, clean clothes and then come down to that place they call the bar when you are ready. No, we'll sit outside on the pavement. There's some shade under the awnings there and I have a luncheon engagement for you at one o'clock."

Hayter indulged in a broad Scottish grin.

"I'm entirely agreeing with you, Mr. Beverley," he said, "but if you sit there thinking to see some of the beauties of the town go by you'll be disappointed. There's a few floating about when the lights are lit but they're a hard-looking lot of lassies in the daytime."

"Never mind," his employer replied. "I have plenty of cigarettes and I haven't looked at one of the papers I brought out from London yet."

"I would sit right down outside if I were you, and don't go wandering about the place alone," was Hayter's farewell admonition. "It was in a cafe about six doors down the street where they got hold of me for no earthly reason whatever, except that I could not speak a word of their blasted lingo and they knew that I was working at the mine. The Café Klast they called it. Don't you put your head in there, sir."

Beverley smiled.

"Don't you worry, Hayter," he said. "I'm not looking for trouble. Put on some decent things and get down as soon you can. I have a small luncheon party at one o'clock and I may be taking you for a little expedition up-country afterwards."

"An expedition out of the country would suit me better," the Scotsman grumbled as he turned away.

CHAPTER XIX

Will Hayter, when he accosted Beverley about an hour later in the hall of the hotel, presented a very different appearance. He had taken a bath, had his hair cut, shaved, was wearing presentable linen and a neat grey tweed suit.

"I am a new man indeed," he declared. "I am needing one thing and one thing only—that is a drop of old Scotch."

"We'll find that all right," Beverley assured him with a glance at the clock. "We have twenty minutes before lunch."

He felt a hand on his shoulder. Rudolph Mauranesco was standing there, smiling and debonair.

"You will give me the pleasure?" he begged with a bow to Hayter.

Beverley introduced them. There was a queer little flash for a moment in Hayter's keen blue eyes as he shook hands, but no sign of recognition from the younger man.

"I have heard of Mr. Hayter," the latter said courteously, "as being your famous engineer and geologist. I am delighted to meet him. I trust that he is joining us at luncheon."

"I'm delighted to be here myself," Hayter declared drily. "We were speaking of a little refreshment, Mr. Mauranesco."

"You will both do me the honour," the young man replied. "This way, if you please."

He led them down the passage, on the wall of which was painted "To the American Bar," and showed himself at once very much at home in his surroundings. He exchanged gracious greetings with everybody in the crowded place. There were officers in the grey and magenta uniform of the country, who sat mostly apart drinking from small wineglasses, twirling their moustaches and preserving as far as possible an air of aloofness. There were shopkeepers and the *commis voyageurs* of the east. There was also a considerable sprinkling of the young bloods and damsels of the place—the former for the most part attired in flannel trousers and either pullovers or embroidered shirts of intricate design. A noisy orchestra was blaring out American melodies. A dozen automatic machines, all being well patronised, parted every now and then with a loud little stream of coins. Rudolph Mauranesco summoned a waiter and gave a rapid order, then he turned to his two companions apologetically.

"Mr. Hayter will understand," he said, "that here there is little choice. For him I have ordered the whisky of his country. For you, Mr. Beverley, I have ordered the home made vermouth and a little gin as a corrective. They will add a dash of bitters and a small piece of lemon. It is as near as we can get to the Western idea of a cocktail. There is little else here that is drinkable."

"That sounds all right," Beverley observed as the three men ensconced themselves in a corner. "Isn't this place rather unusually full?"

Rudolph Mauranesco nodded.

"The whole city," he confided, "is bubbling with excitement."

"Political?" Beverley enquired.

"Entirely," the young man assented. "I wish to give you both a word of caution. Mr. Hayter, from his unfortunate experience, should realise the importance of it."

"I have realised a good many things since I set foot in this country," Hayter grunted.

"It gets worse every day," Rudolph continued. "Strangers and people of importance such as ourselves are spied upon and listened to in every place we enter and every time we open our mouths."

"It is a mischievous crowd, I'll allow," Hayter said grimly.

Mauranesco smiled.

"Please make excuses," he begged, "for a people of excitable temperament. That indeed we are. We will talk together, we three; but we will talk of the ladies of London or Paris or the film magnates of Hollywood."

"I am not knowing anything about those gentlemen," Hayter admitted, "but I promise you that I am keeping a still tongue in my head."

"Not a word," Rudolph went on, leaning towards them, "of the Left Party or the Right or Lavaroko or Pravadia. Politics are not our interest. If we talk at all let it be of business. I will tell you of these piles of bauxite which I hope I may soon be showing to our friend Mr. Hayter here."

"You will be showing me something new, then," the Scotsman observed. "I have never seen bauxite in piles yet."

"It would be simpler, perhaps," Beverley suggested drily, "if we didn't talk at all."

"Or if you listened to me," Rudolph proposed. "I know what will make friends for you in this place. Speak of music. Speak of the possible return of the divine Katarina. Tell us, Mr. Beverley, that you heard her sing in Paris or touched the hem of her garment as she passed you in the Bois or sat in the same restaurant. People will listen to that and admire you for it. Katarina is their idol."

The waiter, in probably the strangest costume ever imagined for one of his profession, brought them two wineglasses and a tumbler, a bottle of whisky and a siphon of soda water upon a tin tray. He wore a pair of soiled linen trousers, a girdle which was like the girdle of a bathrobe around his middle, a blue flannel shirt open at the throat and very little else. He had a Levantine face, a Levantine expression and a Levantine gleam in his narrow unpleasant eyes. He hesitated, waiting patiently for payment, until Beverley suddenly appreciated the situation and produced an English ten-shilling note. The man departed with sudden haste and Rudolph seemed to recover from his momentary fit of abstraction.

"It pleases you, this mixture?" he asked, raising his wineglass to his lips and muttering a few words which were apparently local good wishes.

"Excellent," Beverley replied, sipping the contents of his glass. "Let us now proceed upon the task of talking about nothing. Your café is pleasing. It has local colour. One thing seems to me to be queer about it, though. It is the absence of journals. I haven't seen a sign of a newspaper."

"Nor will you until the last day of the election," the young man replied. "Foreign journals have all been stopped at the frontiers and the offices of the three principal Orlacian newspapers have been sacked and the premises practically destroyed within the last few days."

"Are you serious?" Beverley asked.

"Entirely. The curious part of it is that the results seem to have been justified since the furious rioting of a few nights ago. There have been no quarrels in the cafes or rioting in the streets for forty-eight hours, and no more—forgive me, I say this almost under my breath—" he concluded, leaning forward, "no more unexplained disappearances of foreigners."

"You hear that?" Beverley asked, turning towards Hayter and humouring his companion by speaking almost in a whisper.

"Aye, I hear it," the Scotsman answered. "It's true I might have had a drop or two of whisky that night but it is not true that I said a single word against this country or its Government. It's a fine place, I'm thinking, and there is no mine in the world turning out rich stuff as the Klast Mine. You can take that from me and I'm not caring how many overhear it."

Mauranesco smiled indulgently.

"I do not think that sort of talk is likely to get our friend into trouble," he said. "All the townspeople and the country folk, too, are proud of the Klast Mine, and I am rather happy that Mr. Hayter has spoken of it. You were not thinking, I trust, Mr. Beverley, of visiting your properties before we start on our journey this afternoon?"

"But naturally," Beverley replied. "Why not? There's no frantic haste, is there? I have come a long distance to confer with my managers. Of course I must pay them a visit as soon as possible after my arrival. I should have gone this morning only it was necessary to first secure the release of my friend Hayter here."

"How you managed that is a matter of amazement to me," Rudolph acknowledged. "We do not need to discuss it. Your influence in the place is great, of course, but I should have thought the disorganization in the city and the absence of the King would at least have delayed matters. You are a wonderful man, Mr. Beverley. You arrive, you command, and the prison doors fly open before you."

"They were not very strongly barred," Beverley remarked drily. "This matter of rushing off to inspect your land—"

Rudolph was suddenly excited. He gripped Beverley's arm.

"Remember, I beg of you," he interrupted, "I have been holding over a great matter for your consideration. It is of vast, enormous importance. What does it involve you in? A few hours' journey, a walk or a mule ride along a mountain path; a search, an inspection—one hour—two hours. You will see it all before you. A fortune which even the great capitalists of your Western cities would wonder at! And there is so little time!"

"But why is there so little time?" Beverley asked, accepting a glass from the second tray of drinks which the waiter, in response to an unseen gesture from Rudolph, had brought. "Why the hurry, my young friend? To-morrow, the next day, the day after, your mountains will still be there. If the bauxite you speak of is in evidence, it has lain in those hills for a thousand years. One day is surely as good as another at the end of that time."

There was a strange expression on Rudolph's face. It scarcely resembled an expression of ordinary anxiety. It was as though he were afflicted by some internal torment.

"I wish, Mr. Beverley," he said, "because you have been kind to my sister, because you have shown yourself a friend CO Orlac, that it is you and you only who have to deal with this enormous proposition. To secure it, speed is necessary."

"But if the mineral is on your land, here you are and here am I. What can be done without us? The mountains cannot disappear in smoke, nor can the bauxite be—er—carried away in chariots of fire."

Rudolph was still distracted.

"One cannot tell," he went on eagerly. "I have heard strange stories even this morning whilst I was making my preparations. Two men have been discovered camping out in a sheltered place upon the mountains for several days. My foresters found them. It is my belief that they were searching for bauxite. Then," he continued after a moment's pause, "there is this man Treyer. He is a strange person, that. He is persistent. He has always believed that there was bauxite in the northern part of the kingdom and when he could not approach me, because of my retirement in the fortress, he travelled all the way to London to see my sister. What may he not be doing even now?"

Beverley tapped and lit a cigarette.

"But," he objected, "if this bauxite is really upon your land it would not help him to have discovered it. It will still be yours to dispose of; and although I should not perhaps go so far with a stranger, I will tell you, Rudolph Mauranesco, that there might be difficulties for anyone except our company who attempted to purchase or rent your land upon which bauxite has been discovered here in Orlac."

"But look at the state of my country," Rudolph argued. "We have at the present moment practically no Government. One or two of the permanent officials may be still in their places, but of Government actually, there is none."

"That is only a question of time," Beverley pointed out. "A Government will be formed. Land cannot be disposed of promiscuously. No one could come, for instance, and plant a flag upon your mountains and claim all that lies underneath. A time must arrive when law and order are re-established in the country. At present it would be impossible for anyone to sink huge sums of money in starting a new mine."

Rudolph deftly rolled and lit a cigarette with trembling fingers.

"You are trifling with a gigantic opportunity, Mr. Beverley," he warned him. "When you make up your mind for action, it may be too late."

Beverley glanced at his watch.

"Speaking of time," he remarked, "don't you think that we shall be keeping your sister waiting if we don't make a move?"

"Marya will not mind. When she knows what we have been thinking about she will be glad. She was anxious that I should offer you my property or the rights over it. She will not be happy until she knows that we have come to some arrangement."

"If you ask me, I think she will be starving," Beverley said, draining his glass and rising to his feet. "Do me the favour, Hayter, of telephoning to Mr. Marstan and saying that I will call to see him at three o'clock this afternoon. When I have got through my business, Mauranesco, we will meet again and discuss this journey north."

There was a black cloud of disappointment upon Rudolph's face. It seemed in some unaccountable way to have affected the peculiar quality of his good looks. With the departure of his buoyant air and glad, happy expression, his almost magnetic attraction seemed to have disappeared.

"You are taking a great risk, Mr. Beverley," he said unsteadily. "Perhaps you do not need any more bauxite, perhaps it does not matter to you that someone else may come and behind your back secure, by fair means or foul, rights over my land. I am poor. I cannot stop them. And although the mountains are mine there are other claims."

"If you can convince me that there is any real reason for this urgency," Beverley promised, "I will leave with you after I have seen Marstan—later on to-night, perhaps."

"You insist upon going to the mine first?"

"Be reasonable," Beverley begged. "I have travelled two thousand miles to consult with my managers here. They are within a mile of me now. Of course I must see them before I embark upon any sort of expedition."

Rudolph Mauranesco shrugged his shoulders sulkily.

"You may be risking a great deal more than you know," he muttered.

CHAPTER XX

The restaurant of the hotel, through which Rudolph Mauranesco conducted them, resembled an unconvincing imitation of an English station dining-room not of the first order. There were gilt-edged mirrors hanging upon the walls but most of these were cracked and the quality of the glass indifferent. The curtains which hung before the windows were faded, the atmosphere of the place was musty. There was no carpet upon the tessellated pavement of the floor. There was no attempt at anything in the shape of noiseless service. The waiters were clad in a great variety of shabby clothes and the guests were nearly all men apparently of the bourgeois type, except for a few who were presumably officials, and a sprinkling of young officers whose uniform was somewhat the worse for wear. In comparison with everyone else, Rudolph Mauranesco, who seemed to have made an amazing recovery from his pathetic disappointment, was noticeably and strikingly patrician. He walked with dignity, the few salutations which he vouchsafed to one or two of the company were of a condescending nature, and without any attempt at swagger he was easily the most distinguished-looking of the gathering. The manager, a fat little Austrian, bald-headed, with a fixed smile, preceded them as they passed through the room, flung aside some curtains at the farther end and pointed to a narrow staircase. They mounted in single file and reached a smaller dining-room, the only occupant of which was Suka, already seated in a remote corner. She rose to her feet respectfully at their entrance, and remained standing until they, too, were seated at the only other table laid for service. Rudolph's manners as he held the chair for his sister were those of a Lord Chamberlain. He indicated to Beverley his place by her side, waited for Hayter to take his seat and then leaned over to Beverley.

"You must excuse, if you please, Mr. Beverley," he begged. "This is a faraway corner of the world and we have not yet embraced all the European customs. You were gracious enough to wish for my sister's company at luncheon and so it is arranged. It is not usual, though, for the ladies of our noble families to dine or lunch at a hotel except in a private room. This is the best the manager can do. As you see, it is private but we have a curtain instead of a door and we have a French *maitre d'hôtel* here deputed to take our orders in a language we can all understand."

"Excellent," Beverley approved. "Your sister must be starving—so am I."

The menu and wine card were both presented to Beverley, who accepted the situation and promptly commenced to study them. He did his best from an indifferent bill of fare and a very sparse *carte de vins*. By his side sat Marya, an air of grave annoyance deepening upon her face. Beverley, who understood very well the faint curve of her exquisite lips and the contraction of her eyebrows, did his best to dispel her ill-humour.

"Your brother is being very kind," he said. "I should be absolutely lost in this place without him."

Rudolph bowed with the air of one who receives a well-deserved compliment.

"You needed little help in the choosing of the luncheon, Mr. Beverley," he remarked. "One only regrets that the opportunities here for culinary enterprise are so limited."

"If I may be allowed a trifling remark," Hayter interposed, "it was a joy to me to hear my friend Mr. Beverley handling the menu. I have it in my mind that he must remember where I have spent the last few days, for his choice of dishes seems to me excellent. To judge by the plates I noticed below, too, the people in this part of the world are not without appetites."

Rudolph smiled happily. He leaned across to his sister.

"Our friend Mr. Hayter," he said, "who I might tell you is a distinguished geologist, has suffered during this upheaval in the city very much in the same way as I have suffered myself."

"I have been in prison," Hayter confessed. "There's no denying that and I hope the young lady will believe that I was innocent of any offence to the man or to the law. It was a wicked affair. I think that they had no liking for my nationality or my business."

Marya smiled graciously.

"I am quite sure, Mr. Hayter," she said, "that you did nothing wrong."

"You will perhaps feel a little more at your ease," her brother remarked, "if I tell you, Mr. Hayter, that I myself, well known though I am and a personal friend of His Majesty's, have been in trouble within the last few weeks. I myself have been confined in a fortress. Politics, you understand. Always politics."

Marya glanced at him contemptuously but she remained silent. There was a humorous twist to Hayter's lips but he restrained himself.

"I had heard something of the matter," he admitted, "although I was not thinking I would meet the gentleman. If this soup is of your ordering, Mr. Beverley, you were well acquainted with the best dishes of this country. I have made it myself—it is half a goulash and half a potage, but it is fine stuff for a hungry man."

He disappeared from the conversation for several minutes. Beverley leaned towards his companion.

"Marya Mauranesco," he said, "we must learn to accept the trifling foibles of our friends as we find them. There are times, you know, when even the truth is better glossed over. In any case, it is not worth while to brood over trifles."

"You are very sympathetic," she told him gently; "but beyond the trifles there are other things—yes?"

She glanced at her brother who was seated opposite. It was a very large table and their places were of necessity a long way apart. Beverley calmly moved his chair nearer to hers.

"I am humiliated," she confided, "that even here in our own city we must accept as a matter of course your hospitality. I will try to consider that as a trifle, but I am not happy that you are here in Orlac without any friends or advisers who know the place and the people. I am not happy, either, that you propose to start upon this expedition with Rudolph."

"And I shall not be in the least happy if you go and bury yourself in that convent," he assured her.

"There is no question at the present moment of burying myself," she replied. "Certainly our Holy Sister Georgina would not, after my journey to London, accept me for the present in the convent itself. The most I could hope for would be a temporary home in the House of Passers-by—outside the gates. But, Mr. Beverley—"

"Nigel Beverley," he interrupted under his breath.

"Nigel Beverley, then," she corrected herself. "Do please remember that you are in a lawless place and, deeply though it hurts me to say so, I do not trust Rudolph."

Beverley glanced quickly at the farther end of the table. The young man was well out of hearing, however, and showed no sign of being interested in anything except his luncheon.

"You cannot tell how miserable I am to say these things," Marya went on, dropping her voice a little, "but in this place with Rudolph, although he is my brother, you must believe nothing you hear. You must take nothing for granted. You must think carefully for yourself before you accept anything that Rudolph tells you as being true. Now he begins to look at me suspiciously. I can say no more. I trust it is enough."

"It is enough," he assured her. "We start well with our luncheon. River trout is always a luxury and I find no fault with the cooking. Serve Mademoiselle with the wine," he ordered the *maitre d'hôtel*.

Rudolph leaned forward in his chair. His smile was one of content.

"You chose well indeed, sir," he congratulated Beverley. "The mountain fish here are always excellent and the chickens are sometimes eatable. The food of the country is not so bad. It is when we import that we fail. We have little ice, no proper system of refrigeration. One train a day passes through the country; four goods-trains, which take more than a week to get anywhere, lumber through Klast across Europe. Everything is dear, but that makes no matter. No one in the kingdom," he concluded with a happy laugh, "has any money at all and nobody pays for anything."

"I am wondering what might become of the trifling sum the Klast Mine contributes to the revenue here," Hayter remarked with a grin.

"Some portion, I suppose, must circulate," Rudolph admitted, "but most of it disappears into the coffers of the ministers. And after that—whew!—it disappears altogether. Madame the wife of the Financial Secretary—a new dress arrives for her from Paris. Mademoiselle his mistress turns the heads of the young men and the starving officers here with the confections for which she ransacks the *magasins* of Klast. Monsieur the Premier—well, a new motor-car arrives. For his secretaries, clothes from the tailors of Vienna or Paris. But of coin, of ready money, there is little to be seen. Everyone lives here on what you call in England 'the tick.' Sometimes, if there is to be a settlement, it is an affair of barter. There is a farmer who owes me much money for rent. If I press him, all that I shall get will be a cow."

"My brother must not be taken too seriously," Marya said with a faint relaxation of her lips. "I do not believe that there is a person in the kingdom who owes Rudolph one copper coin. The rent for any miserable acres which are left of our estates goes quite properly to those who have advanced money on them."

Rudolph sighed sadly.

"My sister," he explained with a little wave of the hand, "knows nothing of the life in Klast or anywhere else. She is the spiritual foster-child of her aunt. Sister Georgina, and although Sister Georgina has been a great lady and is still a saint on earth, what she knows about life is exactly nothing at all."

Luncheon, which had its weak spot, in the shape of goat cutlets, as well as its more successful ones, passed on towards its conclusion. They drank coffee afterwards, of unexpected quality. Hayter, after first asking Marya's permission, lovingly filled his black briar pipe. Beverley drew his chair a little closer still to Marya's. Her brother, happily smoking one of Beverley's cigarettes, crossed the room to speak to Suka.

"When shall I see you again, Marya Mauranesco?" Beverley asked.

She lifted her wonderful eyes and looked at him thoughtfully—almost, it seemed to him, tenderly.

"I ask myself that question," she confessed in a low tone, "and I am unhappy. If I go to the convent, though it be only to the House of Passers-by, Sister Georgina will expect me to stay."

"You do not wish to stay?"

"I should save myself from the affronts of life," she reflected wistfully. "I should find there quiet for my soul. I am not sure that I should find peace."

"Why not?"

She remained silent for several moments. They were practically alone now. Hayter, still smoking his beloved pipe, had strolled across to the window and was looking down into the square. Rudolph had disappeared from the room.

"It is hard to answer that question," she acknowledged, "but in all my life, although I have not seen you often, Nigel Beverley, you are the only one who has spoken to me kindly and gently, who has seemed to understand the thoughts which have been beating against the walls of my mind. If I go back now to seek the peace of the cedar and the Cyprus trees, the evening chants, the music of our organ, the perfumes from Sister Georgina's garden, the sighing of the wind, all the things that have become dear to me, I fear that that peace would be gone. So long as you remain in Klast I should be unhappy because I should know that you were in danger."

The thrill of her words with their exquisitely personal touch was like the breath of a new life to Nigel Beverley, and ever afterwards he thought how miraculous it was that this new life could have come to him in these strange, sordid surroundings, in this ugly room with its soiled tablecloths, its chipped blue-china trays for tobacco ash and toothpicks, its uneven, unwashed tessellated floor covered only in places with a few worn rugs, its shabby gilt cornices and ill-cleaned windows. From the restaurant below came the rumble and cackle of high-pitched voices, the clatter of crockery, the call of the hard-worked waiters. From the square outside the only audible sound was the rattle of rubberless wheels over the cobbled way. Yet in this very unlikely abode of romance—only a few inches from his ears—came this stream of music more wonderful than anything to which he had ever listened.

"If you do not go back to the convent, Marya," he asked, using her Christian name alone for the first time, "is there no friend in Klast who could keep you for a few days until the way lies clearly before—us?"

There was a faint stream of colour in her pale face. Her eyes met his.

"I need no one but Suka," she confided. "There could be no watchdog or chaperon like her. In the attic of the Mauranesco palace there is still some of our old furniture and some clothing of mine. I could go back there. I have been thinking^ during luncheon. I believe that I will do that."

Always afterwards Beverley was grateful that in those few moments—those priceless moments—some sort of inspired instinct kept him from premature utterance of the thoughts which were in his heart.

"It would be a great happiness to me, Marya," he admitted, "if I could feel that you were near at hand. I think that the danger you speak of is exaggerated, but help I might need. And you can give it."

She drew a little sigh but it was not a sigh of pain.

"I make my decision, then," she announced. "I shall go back to our rooms. Now that we have decided that, I proceed to offer you my advice. Do not leave this place with Rudolph to-day. Go first to your mine and talk to your manager. Go to your ministry and see if your Englishman, Sir Walter Harding, has returned. Seek an interview with Lavaroko or with Predor Pravadia, whom they say will be the new Premier. Spend the night at the hotel here. Afterwards, to-morrow at dawn if you will, go north with Rudolph—but take others with you. Take that strange-looking man with the pipe—the Scotsman. Take someone else who knows the country, if you can."

"What shall I find in the north, Marya?"

"If I knew I would tell you," she answered simply. "It may be as my brother says, but I am not sure. It is my sorrow to repeat that he does not speak the truth. The mountain ridge and the old castle now in ruins is Mauranesco land, but much of it has passed from our possession and much of it is in the hands of a band of wild goatherds who are little better than savages. I have a strange idea—but I cannot put it into words."

"An idea of evil?"

"Nigel," she went on, "will you please remember what I ask you? Watch all that is happening around you, by night and by day."

"I will do that," he promised, glancing across the room to where Rudolph, who had just returned, was talking with Hayter by the window. "And I will think also of you who give me this advice."

There was a new sweetness in that pathetic yet he almost dared to think affectionate little smile which parted her lips. Her hand was stretched upon the table. He looked at it longingly. His heart ached to possess himself of it for a single second—to give one tender pressure to those fingers. He rose instead to his feet. He made no effort, however, to keep back the tenderness in his tone as he stooped over her.

"Every word you have spoken," he said, "has gone to my heart and will live in my memory. Will you give me one promise?"

She lifted her eyes.

"I will try."

He saw the beginnings of fear, and he spoke quickly.

"All that I would ask, Marya, is that you do not return to the convent finally until I come back."

She smiled her consent and it was a smile which lived in his memory for long afterwards.

"That I will promise," she said.

It was Will Hayter who created the diversion from his place before the window. He looked round and called to the others in the room.

"'Tis a wee bit of a disturbance," he announced, "but I gather it's of a cheerful nature."

They all hurried to the window. A carriage had pulled up outside the front door of the hotel, a carriage which was already empty although people were rushing along the pavement to greet the person who had just descended from it. Down below there was a solid screen of people standing upon the chairs of the open-air café, blocking the view into the street. The tumult was continued in the restaurant underneath. The little company in the private dining-room could hear the crowd below them shouting. Then the curtain was swept aside. There was the sound of footsteps on the stairs, a momentary glimpse of bowing waiters and hotel officials, from amongst whom emerged the figure of a woman. She entered the room like a whirlwind, dressed for a voyage, half-smothered in furs, the flowers which had been thrown still clinging to her skirts and shoulders. Her hands were outstretched, her large beautiful eyes wide-open.

"Where is he then? I ask—where is he? It is Mr. Beverley I seek."

Beverley gazed in amazement at the approaching figure. It was Katarina.

The next few moments passed in indescribable confusion. Beverley himself scarcely realised what was happening. He only knew that Katarina had twined her hands almost round his neck, that her face was upturned to his. She was making a wonderful entrance.

"I have found you!" she cried. "It is Monsieur Beverley! He is safe—safe! I am happy."

He felt himself dragged away towards the window. Everyone else was speechless. Marya had shrunk back and was standing alone. In the background, a look of proud horror in her face. Katarina was the dominant figure.

"I must show myself at the window," she declared. "All the time people call for me."

"Where is Nicolas?" Rudolph demanded.

She swung her arm almost threateningly towards him.

"He comes later, perhaps," she replied. "I have speech to make with my friend here. Go away, Rudolph Mauranesco. Leave us...I stand so at the window. I smile...Those are all my friends, those people in the square, but I must have words quickly with Monsieur Beverley."

She threw kisses from the tips of her fingers, laughed aloud and waved her hand. Then in the midst of it all she turned to Beverley.

"Listen," she cried, "I come to save your life. There is one in this room who would kill you if he dared. There are plots against you. Nicolas has deceived us both."

Beverley, with an almost desperate effort, extricated himself from the arms which were endeavouring to fold him in an even closer embrace. For years afterwards he remembered the cloying perfume of furs which for a moment had been pressed against him.

"Madame Katarina!" he protested sternly. "I beg—"

She interrupted him, fury in her voice, anger blazing out of her eyes. She pointed to Rudolph, who seemed suddenly to have lost control of himself and had burst into a torrent of angry abuse. Beverley listened for a moment and then looked away to where Marya had been. Save for himself, Katarina, Rudolph, and Will Hayter, the room was empty. Marya and Suka had disappeared.

CHAPTER XXI

Beverley, a little later in the afternoon, was seated in the handsomely furnished private office of Mr. Herbert Marstan, manager of the Klast Mine, listening to his very disquieting report.

"The whole situation's damned ridiculous!" Marstan declared, striking the blotting pad in front of him with his clenched fist and scowling across at his visitor. "The layout is more like a Gilbert and Sullivan opera! Just step this way, Mr. Beverley."

He led him to the window and the two men stood looking out into the beautifully kept courtyard with its mass of carefully-tended flowering shrubs in the centre.

"See those wooden boxes," Marstan asked, "do you know what they are?"

"Look like sentry boxes."

Marstan nodded.

"You should see the popinjays who spend a few hours a day inside them spitting and smoking cigarettes!" he exclaimed. "Soldiers of the Orlacian public guard, sent up here to protect us! There are supposed to be half-a-dozen about the place at the gates and doors, but they are probably over at the café gambling. See those heaps of matting?"

"Yes, I see them."

"Machine guns underneath," Marstan went on. "We have a dozen old soldiers on the staff and we have drill every night. Nice state of things in a Christian country!"

"But my dear fellow," Beverley expostulated, "why haven't you kept us more in touch with these developments?"

"How the mischief could I?" was the manager's almost pathetic rejoinder, "Every letter sent out from here has been censored since the week before last. All my communications to the firm have gone over in Sir Walter Harding's private bag, otherwise you wouldn't have received one of them."

"But what are the machine guns for?"

"Most nights there is a minor riot in the place," Marstan explained. "The people of Orlac have got it into their minds that the foreigners—ourselves for example—are making a great fortune out of the mine whilst they themselves are starving."

"But couldn't you get definite protection from the police force of the city?" Beverley asked.

"Not a hope. The head of the police has shut himself up and won't see anyone. No one knows to whom you can apply. The fact of it is that Orlac is in a state of revolution. Parliament has been dissolved, an election is taking place all over the country, and the extreme Left, communists of every sort, bolshevists—anything you like to call them—are going to win. That is the party that demand that our charter should be cancelled and that they should work the mine and sell the results."

"Harding knows this?"

"He has gone over to London. Much good it will do him! He's taken his wife with him, too. You'll find the Embassy practically deserted."

"Well, I had a talk with Harding and I expected to find everything rather upset over here," Beverley admitted, "but I had no idea it was as bad as this. Given you a bit of a shock, I'm afraid."

"Life has been a perfect hell for the last six weeks," Marstan admitted wearily. "No good making a fuss about it, Mr. Beverley, but I haven't been outside these gates for over a month. Last time I tried to get down to the hotel where I have been living I was surrounded before I could reach the pavement. Fortunately they are all rank cowards. I flourished an empty gun and they were off like scared rabbits. The next night, though, there were twice as many of them waiting—and the ugliest-looking lot, too. I had the gates locked, every entrance to the mine patrolled, and I haven't left the place since."

"And Will Hayter—" Beverley began.

"God knows where he is," the other interrupted. "He was arrested ten days ago. Never even been brought before the magistrate, so far as I can hear. Just disappeared. If Harding hadn't been away I should have telephoned to ask him to find out. As it is, there is no one there with any sort of authority at all. The first secretary was set upon by a mob the other night, badly injured, and is lying in hospital now. I have even had my private wire down to the mine cut twice."

"Were things as bad as this when Harding left?"

"Not quite. The last few days has seen a change for the worse."

"And you're practically cut off," Beverley meditated.

"I have managed to get a wireless message or two across the frontier," Marstan confided, "but I can't get any replies."

"What about the labour itself—your miners?"

"That's easy," Marstan pronounced. "They are earning such money as they never touched before, and they are all for getting along with it. We aren't a day behind with production."

"I could look round the place, I suppose?"

"If you don't mind taking a chance. No one inside the boundaries has been particularly troublesome up to now. You had better take this," Marstan went on, opening a cupboard which was full of firearms of every sort. "That's a good revolver. American type—a little small—but it does the trick all right. A box of cartridges here, too. I wouldn't move without it for a day or two if I were you, Mr. Beverley."

Beverley slipped the weapon into his coat-pocket.

"Good thing we had the place fenced in so thoroughly," he remarked.

"Damned good thing," Marstan agreed, picking up his hat, "All the same, the mob seem to have got a vein of common sense under their folly. They realise that we are drawing wealth out of the land and they don't want that stopped. I listened to one of the tub-thumpers the last time I was in the city—I have picked up a good deal of their lingo, you know—and he was advising them to leave the mine alone. The devils are just cunning enough to stop short of wilful destruction. They want the mine, but they want it in its present condition."

"I should like to have a look round and see what sort of condition it is in," Beverley proposed.

"I'll show you round with pleasure," Marstan agreed, leading his visitor towards the door. "I must admit that all our trained staff have been wonderful. You would scarcely believe, when you see how we are carrying on, what a pitiful state things are in outside. We will have a glance at the laboratories, if you don't mind, before we start on the serious business."

"As you will," his companion assented.

Beverley, an hour or so later, sank wearily into an easy chair in the private office. Marstan unlocked a mahogany cupboard, produced a bottle of Scotch whisky, glasses and a siphon of soda water. He mixed two drinks and passed a tumbler to his visitor.

"No ice," he commented briefly. "The works aren't running. There are no cigarettes to be bought here but standard makes of American, and filthy French stuff. If you're a pipe-smoker—"

"I have plenty of cigarettes, thank you," Beverley interrupted, drawing out his case. "Help yourself."

Marstan in his turn sank into a chair with a gesture of fatigue, shook his head and filled his pipe.

"I have tired you out, sir, I'm afraid," he said, "but I have made one side of the matter clear, I hope: The mine's being run almost like clockwork. On that piece of paper you have, you see exactly how many tons of stuff we're dragging up, how much of the magnesium goes through the machines, and—without bothering you too much about the relative quantities—you know how much of the finished metal we are turning out. We are paying to the King and the Government between them three thousand pounds a week. We are shipping tonnage the amount of which you can figure out for yourself. It's enormous. This is one of the most valuable properties of its sort in the world, and we have kept it going. If we are left alone, Mr. Beverley, everyone connected with the mine is in for a long period of prosperity. If there are going to be riots, breaking-up of machinery, strikes, we are not in a position to cope with them. We are at the mercy of the Government—which means no Government at all. We have neither police nor military sufficient to protect us."

Beverley drank half his whisky-and-soda at a gulp, then he lit a cigarette.

"You give me the clearest outlook on the mine I have ever had," he said. "Now I come to the real trouble outside. First of all, do you believe in this rumour about the finding of bauxite in the northern part of the kingdom?"

"I do not," Marstan declared tersely. "I am satisfied with the original report Hayter and our geologists handed in after they had explored the whole country. I don't believe there's any more bauxite to be found nearer than those worked-out mines in Hungary. Will Hayter had just made arrangements for paying

another flying visit up north when he got into this trouble, whatever it may be, but I can tell you this—he doesn't believe it either. And there's that rotten German agent, Treyer, who has been hanging round, disappearing and then turning up again for the last year. I don't believe he has any real faith in it himself. He and a young blackguard of an aristocrat—MauranESCO—are snooping round all the time. They tell me they have changed their tactics now. I should not be surprised if half this trouble outside wasn't engineered by them. They want to get hold of this mine. Keep your eyes open in the city, Mr. Beverley. Don't give them a chance to get at you."

"I am supposed to be going up north with young MauranESCO to-night or to-morrow to look at some land of his where he says there is bauxite," Beverley confided. "Taking Will Hayter with me, too, by the by."

"Will Hayter!" the other exclaimed.

Beverley nodded.

"We have been so busy," he explained, "that I have not been able to tell you all my news. I had a letter of introduction to the Chief of Police here, and directly your young man Underwood told me about Hayter I went straight to him, meaning really only to ask for an interview."

"What—to General Kara Bavan himself?"

"The General himself," Beverley assented. "I found him very civil and I got a great deal more than I expected out of him. He gave me an order of release which I took to the prison, and Will Hayter is now back at the hotel smoking pipe after pipe and cursing the country of Orlac. All the same, he's a free man."

"A good stroke of work, that," Marstan acknowledged. "It is a great relief to me, too, I can assure you, sir."

"Well, there he is, and we're going up north probably to-night. If, by any chance, this rumour of bauxite being there has any foundation, I have already an undertaking from Nicolas to use his influence with any government there may be to grant us the mining rights. I have seen a specimen and young MauranESCO swears that there is heaps of it up north in a spot Hayter never went near. That is why I am off on this expedition to-night."

"It's a marvellous thing to do," Marstan declared after a moment's troubled thought. "You are one of the quickest workers I ever knew, Mr. Beverley. The only thing is I cannot help feeling nervous about MauranESCO. From what I hear of him he's a bad lot."

"He may be," Beverley admitted. "All the same, I can't see what he has to gain exactly by taking me up there if there's nothing to show for it."

"What I ask myself is this," Marstan explained anxiously: "If he wants to take anyone up there why doesn't he take that German fellow, Treyer? They've been about a lot together, I know."

"Perhaps Treyer can't get the money," Beverley suggested. "The young man admits he is desperately poor. Treyer may have big men behind him but he doesn't give one the impression of being dangerous."

"Doesn't he?" Marstan grunted. "Well, I can tell you this, Mr. Beverley. He would cut your throat in a minute if he thought it would bring him any nearer to getting a share in this mine or any other where he could find bauxite—and as for the Germans, I believe that they are trooping into the place. They are trying to make friends with anyone in politics they think likely to be in the next Government. They say that's the reason the King is keeping away, but there are rumours that they have found him out—even in Paris."

"All this," Beverley pointed out, "only makes it more important that I should take Hayter up north and see for myself how the land lies. We cannot afford to have the Germans get in on this stuff, Marstan, either politically or for any other reason. What is your private opinion about the King?"

"A difficult question," Marstan said. "I have only met him once and that was just after he had drawn his first cheque for royalties and we were all little gods to him then. He is still getting his money paid him through the Credit Lyonnais, and the Government, or what stands for it, is still getting theirs. If you ask me, I should say that we are paying them month by month a larger sum than the whole internal revenue of the country. I believe that Nicolas is staying in Paris until after the elections here. If he were here and any question of appropriating the mine turned up he would not only be losing his royalties but he would be between the devil and the deep blue sea when he was asked to make a decision."

"Is he popular?" Beverley asked. "Could he hold out against a Government who asked him to cancel our charter? In plain words, do you think he would be deposed if he refused? Do the Orlacians want him back at all?"

"They are a queer people," Marstan answered dubiously. "It is my belief that if he would send back his companion—the great *prima donna*, Katarina, who owns the opera house here, you know—he could come or stay, just as he pleased. The people would not care a damn but they are crazy about music and they worship Katarina."

"A very personable lady," Beverley murmured.

"You have met her?"

Beverley nodded.

"Lunched with her and Nicolas a few days ago," he confided. "That is how I know that we cannot altogether trust Nicolas. He has already received that fellow Treyer."

Marstan groaned.

"It's a damn' bad lookout for us, then," he declared.

Beverley made no direct reply.

"What about Lavaroko?" he asked suddenly. "That's the man who signed our charter."

"Drinking himself to death," Marstan replied gloomily. "All the same, you ought to see him, Mr. Beverley."

"Do you know anything of Predor Pravadia, the leader of the Left Wing?"

"A rank out-and-out communist, a fine figure of a man and he may have a few principles—but not many. Anyhow, his present battle-cry is 'Orlac for the people,' and when he says 'Orlac' he means the mine."

Beverley picked up his hat.

"I must go," he announced. "All the advice I can give you for the moment is—carry on."

"We will do that," the other promised. "So far there has been no attempt to interfere with the machinery, the workers or the transport. There's a lot of damned tub-thumping in the city, but both sides seem to have

common sense enough to know that if they touch the mine they kill the goose that lays the golden egg. It is like this," Marstan concluded as he walked with Beverley to the door. "There will probably be a revolution in this place directly. They say that if Nicolas returns there may be an assassination but whatever happens the people have just sense enough to see that whoever holds the mine is going to rule the country; and they can't run the mine without us."

Beverley stepped into the old-fashioned car with the royal arms emblazoned on both panels which was waiting for him outside. Marstan remained bare-headed on the threshold.

"Where shall I tell him to go to?" he asked.

"To the Convent of Notre Dame."

Marstan repeated the order to the ruffianly-looking chauffeur. His eyebrows were slightly upraised but he made no comment.

CHAPTER XXII

Never again in the immediate future or in the years to come did Nigel Beverley count himself amongst the ranks of the unimpressible. He sat upon a hard black-oak bench in a waiting-room of the House of Passers-by, and gradually he felt a subtle change in the atmosphere he was breathing, in the thoughts that stole into his mind. It was not only the tranquillity of the place itself, not only the beauty of those chimes which came softly in mellow, musical notes, or the aromatic perfume of the flowers and flowering shrubs outside stealing into the room, which had their effect upon him. It was a wave of something utterly unanalysable, which seemed suddenly to bring rest to his jangled nerves and to soothe his overstrung mentality. He had never been an irreligious man but faith to him had become a superstition. He had never been prejudiced, and in those few drifting moments he was glad of it. Time moved slowly in harmony with his thoughts and sometimes it seemed almost to lapse. The end came when the door was quietly opened and a woman entered. He rose at once to his feet, and he was conscious of the long and earnest scrutiny of her clear grey eyes. She wore the disguising and undistinguished garb of a religious order, but notwithstanding the pallor of her cheeks, the saintlike immobility of her features, he realised at once why, in those few years of her vivid and splendid life in the various Courts of Europe, she had been accounted one of the most beautiful women alive.

"You are Mr. Beverley," she said, and her voice was all that her presence promised. "Please to remain seated. You asked to be allowed to speak to my charge, Marya Mauranesco."

"I hope I may be permitted to do so," he answered.

"What is your object in wishing to see her, Mr. Beverley? No, I pray you remain seated," she added, waving him back. "I stand always. We have our strange ideas, you know, we people who live solitary lives, and it seems to me that I think more clearly when I stand. Please forget the manners of the outside world and tell me what it is you wish to say to Marya."

"Madame—" he began.

"Sister Georgina, if you please," she interrupted.

"Sister Georgina, then," he went on. "I find it hard to tell you but I have offended unconsciously a young woman for whom I have a great admiration and respect. I wish to make the situation clear to her. I wish her to understand that for anything which happened after luncheon to-day I was in no way responsible."

"Why does that matter?"

"It matters to me very much," Beverley declared. "I have a great admiration for Marya Mauranesco. I do not wish to sink in her esteem."

"She has spoken of an Englishman who has been kind to her," she said, "during those few weeks of unsuitable, unfitting life which she passed in London. She has offered me no confidences; I do not ask for yours; but she has sought the shelter of this home for troubled people and it is my wish to protect her from all evil, real and imaginary."

"I have begun to think. Sister Georgina," Beverley ventured, "that that is also my wish."

"We are in conflict then," she answered, "for the two could never go together. Tell me about yourself, Mr. Beverley. You are a great man of affairs, I understand. You have wealth. You own the mine which has brought prosperity to this small kingdom."

"Details would only weary you, Sister Georgina," he replied. "I am a wealthy man, after my fashion."

"You come of a family who have adopted commerce for a career?" she asked.

"No. I come of gentle people. My father and uncle were both in the different Services of my country, the army and the navy; but I have no dislike for commerce. It leaves plenty of scope for the imagination, it makes continual call upon your judgment. Does this matter very much, Sister Georgina?"

She shook her head. There was a faint suggestion of apology in the gesture.

"It is only by questioning you, Mr. Beverley," she said, "that I can think about you afterwards and make up my mind as to what sort of man you are. You find me here in charge of many young souls who know nothing of the outside life. That has not been my good fortune. I had unfortunately connections with one of the royal families of Europe and for a time I tried to do what I thought to be my duty in the world, so you see I am not ignorant nor am I a prejudiced woman, but I have seen much in life that was unpleasant and very little indeed that seemed to lead to the greater happiness. That is why I ask you these anxious questions. My young relative has come back here a little shaken after her brief contact with unfamiliar methods of existence. I do not think that she is fitted for such efforts. I think that she is too much a saint by instinct to enter a life which bristles with vulgarity of happenings and vulgarity of morals. That is why I am anxious and disturbed because her interest in you was such that she wished to see you. I could not refuse, but I said that I would talk to you first. That I insisted upon."

"It is reasonable. Sister Georgina," Beverley answered. "I am a very ordinary person but it is possible that here and there in our attitude towards life as it is lived nowadays we might, if we had time, find things in common."

"Do you wish to marry my niece?"

"You ask me a question," Beverley replied, "which I have never asked myself. I believe, I earnestly believe, that I do."

"There is a hesitation still in your mind."

"A hesitation because I have followed my impulse and my instinct in this matter," Beverley explained, "and I have never weighed it in my mind. I am much older than Marya and although I have led, as men go, a comparatively blameless life I am not a saint. She lives on a higher plane than I, perhaps, but if I do wish

to marry her, and I believe I do, I shall do my best rather to live up to her standard than to ask her to adopt mine. At the same time," he went on earnestly, "I must tell you this. Sister Georgina. In the world where I belong and which you have left, doubtless for fine and excellent reasons, idealism in one's daily life is hard to realise. We have not the time for meditation, the time to subdue the human side of ourselves by long hours of reflection. We live according to our lights. I must tell you that I have no faith. That, I know, is a terrible thing to say to you. Perhaps it will finish our interview."

Sister Georgina shook her head.

"No," she said. "I have lived a woman's life, Mr. Beverley, although no human power could tempt me back into the world I read and hear of. I am happy here—all my surroundings please me—the sheer beauty of my daily life keeps me content—but—do not let this astonish you too much—I have no faith either. I worship but I have no clear idea whom I worship. I simply know that it is good for my soul and my body to believe that I believe—and so I go on. I watch my young people carefully; and those who I think are capable of it, and fitted for it, I pray to stay here and take vows in which I myself scarcely believe."

"Sister Georgina," Beverley said a little impulsively, "you are a wonderful woman."

She smiled dissent.

"A very ordinary one: too much of a woman ever to become a saint. Never before in my life, not when I left it after a visit to Rome or since, have I said as much to any man as I have said to you. I wanted to see if I could, in these few minutes, decide what manner of man you were. I shall send you my young relative, Mr. Beverley. You shall have your talk with her. But listen, I will not say that I am not making a mistake. I have been deceived so often, I have been surprised many and many a time, because there is some quality of life, some strange questing impulse, sometimes beautiful but not always so, which I find in the young people under my care which I recognise, and I seek no longer to keep them here because the life for them would not be a natural one. But in Marya I have found nothing of this, Mr. Beverley. I have believed her to have the mind and soul of a saint. My faith in that is not shaken but I can run no risk, I can never ask her to bury herself here for always until I am sure. Therefore I shall send her to you. But, Mr. Beverley, it is my honest belief—and I say that to you as a woman who has never even thought a falsehood—that Marya has not the impulse, perhaps I should say the aptitude, for married life in busy places, for a life of pleasure and society and idle ways. At present she is so undisturbed. Think carefully, I beg of you as a human being, Mr. Beverley, for whom I feel a real and instinctive respect—do not ask her to change her life for yours unless you are sure, absolutely and entirely sure, that you can make her happy...You will forgive me? Marya will be with you directly."

She inclined her head slightly. There was a softer light in her eyes, and for a moment she was human and nothing else. Then she passed out and Beverley was not very sure whether his whole conversation had not been a dream and whether the woman with whom he had been talking had indeed once been a queen, whether that strange, saintlike loveliness of hers could possibly belong to a person who had held a great place in the world which she had quitted with so little effort. He had forgotten the mine, small conspiracies, the sordidness of the country, the hard, scheming world which flamed so near...Then the door was once more softly opened. Marya came in and stood facing him—Marya, already intangibly altered, somehow carrying with her in some mysterious fashion suggestions of her kinship with the woman whose place she had taken. For a moment Beverley had not even the desire to raise her fingers to his lips and seek for the light in her eyes. He was tongue-tied.

"You wished to speak to me?" she asked.

"Yes," he answered. "Sister Georgina has made it difficult. Will you sit down for a moment?"

She sat on the oak bench a few feet away from him. Somehow or other those few feet seemed like an eternity of distance. He could no more have taken her hand than have made a ghoulish attempt to seize her in his arms.

"Sister Georgina was not pleased that you came," she said.

"But you?"

"It is hard to say."

"Whether you ever see me again or I you, Marya Mauranescu," Beverley declared, "I could not let you go with wrong ideas. Your famous singer is no more to me than the placards of her which disfigure your streets. I have met her twice only, on the occasion of my visits to King Nicolas. I have entertained them both at dinner and at lunch. To me the fact that I came into contact with either of them was simply an episode in the commercial side of my life. I am a man of affairs and I have those to think of who risked their savings in the concerns which I have established, I wished for Nicolas' support in my endeavours to hold on to the mine. I have never spoken a word, looked or felt a thought, concerning Madame Katarina that I would not put on plain paper for you to see, if the gift of expression were given me."

Marya winced as though from some strange and unhappy memory. Nevertheless, she looked at him and he fancied that there was some slight change in the faraway light of her eyes.

"It is a sad thing," she said, "that the ugliest things in life will come and disturb sometimes our deepest thoughts. I thank you for what you have said."

"You believe me?"

"Yes, I believe you."

"But you remain here?"

"Yes, I remain here."

"Why?"

"I cannot tell you," she answered earnestly. "Something inside me is bruised. I know that I am foolish, but remember that already Sister Georgina's example, to breathe the same atmosphere, to watch her hour by hour, to read her thoughts—it has an effect. I left here because I thought that it was my duty. I came to London where everything was ugly. You, too, at first—and then you were kind and you talked to me about pictures and we spoke of beautiful things once or twice. You seemed different. It was then that my fidelity to all the things of which Sister Georgina and I had talked seemed weaker and I began to be almost afraid of myself. Something seemed as though it might grow up in me which would alter my whole life, something which, if she had known, and she would have known, would have made her turn the key of my little room here in the House of Passers-by and wave me away. And now—that is dead. I am going to follow her example."

"I came here," Beverley said, "to ask you to trust me with your future. I told Sister Georgina that I wished to marry you."

For the life of him he could not tell whether it was a thrill or a shiver which went trembling through that slender, beautiful body of hers. He only knew that when she spoke next her eyes had fallen. She was looking down at the floor.

"I do not think that you could have meant that," she faltered. "You know so little of me and I understand so little of what life under those conditions would be. I wish you to go away, please, Nigel Beverley, and remember that you are to marry someone else."

"That is finished," he answered quietly. "Finished before I came abroad."

"I hope she is not unhappy."

"She will never know happiness or unhappiness as you and I know it," he said. "I could find happiness, Marya, with you—not with her or her sort."

She seemed suddenly afraid. Slight though it was he saw the change in her, saw again that momentary shiver, that deeper light of trouble which seemed to shine out of her eyes.

"Please not," she begged. "Please do not talk like that. I have to go. My ten minutes are finished."

"Marya," he persisted earnestly, "I am afraid now that I am here alone with you and the atmosphere of that woman seems to cling to you—even to your clothes and to your voice—I am afraid of saying the wrong thing, but I have a real love for you, Marya."

"You must not," she cried, her voice suddenly raised. "Oh, please, please no more!"

She moved away. He made no effort to follow her. Her fingers were upon the latch of the door.

"Nigel Beverley," she implored, turning round at the last moment, "forget what you said. You do not know. But remember you are not an ordinary person to me. I may tell you that. I felt as though it were sacrilege when that painted woman tried to hold you in her arms, and I would have you live and be happy and marry someone whom you should marry, but because of what I have felt—listen. Be careful. You have enemies in this place. Your life, your safety, your money—everything you care for is in danger."

"There is nothing I care for, Marya, as I care for you," he said doggedly.

Her slight bosom was rising and falling, the lights flashing from her eyes contradicted her words.

"Do not hurt me any more, please," she begged. "Please go and find your way back to England. Do not trust Rudolph. Do not trust either of those two politicians. Do not trust Nicolas. Let someone who counts for less than you come out and deal with them. Go away, please. I am afraid."

"Then you care a little?" he cried quickly.

How she went he scarcely knew. His knees were trembling—he, a strong man. It was a matter of seconds before he was in the stone corridor but there was no sign of Marya. The great gates leading into the convent proper were barred, yet there was no sign of her anywhere in the House of Passers-by...

He walked out to the door. The woman who opened the gate listened to his eager questions but said never a word. She held it open and pointed. Down at the bottom of the hill the horn of his motor was like a call back to an ugly, repulsive life. He looked backwards but the gate closed behind him and he walked down the hill.

CHAPTER XXIII

On his return to the hotel Beverley found Will Hayter, a small black bag by his side, seated in the easy chair of his salon. Opposite to him, talking eagerly in faultless English, stood Rudolph Mauranesco, rolling innumerable miniature cigarettes between his long nervous fingers and throwing them away into the tray of the black-leaded stove after a whiff or two. Beverley looked at them both in some surprise.

"I'm sorry," he apologised. "I have perhaps kept you waiting."

"I have been having an interesting talk with Mr. Hayter," Rudolph said eagerly. "He has been telling me the secrets of detecting bauxite in unexpected places. I thought I knew a little about mineral research myself, but he seems to have spent a lifetime at it."

"He is not very sanguine about your property," Beverley remarked.

"He has not been to find out," Rudolph replied. "He may change his opinion after I have taken him around."

"I change my collar occasionally," Will Hayter observed, "and I am never without a clean shirt on the Sabbath; but my opinions, they stick. I don't often change them, young gentleman. I am calling your attention, Mr. Beverley, to the fact that there is a huge square envelope on the mantelpiece for you with all sorts of bearings and royal devices all over the back of it. It was brought about an hour ago by a flunkey in a flame-coloured livery and an impertinent manner, who could not speak a word of any language that a decent person could understand. Anyway, there's the letter."

Rudolph leaned forward, took it from the mantelpiece and handed it over to Beverley. He gave a little start as he recognised the handwriting.

"Nicolas is back then!" the young man exclaimed. "That polishing of the flagstaff meant something, after all."

Beverley broke the seal and read the contents. The letter was dated from the palace and written in violet ink with many evidences of haste.

Dear Mr. Beverley,

We have just arrived by aeroplane. His Majesty instructs me to say that he wishes an immediate interview with you and desires that you present yourself at the palace immediately on receipt of this note.

G.

P.S. My private advice to you, sir, is to come at once.

Beverley tore the letter into small pieces.

"I'm sorry, Rudolph Mauranesco," he said, "but I may have to postpone our trip north until to-morrow. The King has commanded my attendance at the palace. I don't know what he wants, I don't know how long he will keep me, but in the present troubled state of affairs I feel bound to accede to his wishes."

Rudolph made a gesture of despair. He threw away the cigarette he had just lit.

"Nicolas only wants you," he pointed out, "to make sure that you are not with Katarina. You are trifling with the chance of a lifetime, Mr. Beverley. Something which Mr. Hayter has just said convinces me that

there is bauxite on my hills. Herr Treyer is ready to start at any moment. It is possible that he is already on the way."

"You are an Orlacian," Beverley said calmly "You know what a command from the King means. I have no wish to stand in his bad books."

The young man's gloom vanished.

"It must be," he decided. "It is a moonlight night. We will wait an hour. If you do not come then, Mr. Hayter and I will start on our journey and you can follow us in the morning."

"Where do I go to?" Beverley asked.

"We shall leave you the automobile which you have been using," Rudolph said. "The chauffeur knows the route and the destination. I will take Mr. Hayter in my own Isotta. It is the fastest car in the kingdom, Mr. Hayter, but you will be safe with me. I am a wonderful driver."

"No man who drives fast is a wonderful driver," the Scotsman grunted. "However, there's my master. I will do as I am told."

"Make it an hour and a half," Beverley begged. "If I can be back before, I will. Have you got all your things, Hayter?"

"I've got my instruments," the latter replied, "and the acids—everything that I need—but I warn you, before we go, that we are probably off on a fool's errand. You can't pick up bauxite like pebbles and I have had a glimpse of this strip of mountains before."

Beverley moved to the table and helped himself from the bottle of whisky which stood at Hayter's elbow. He splashed in some soda water and drank it. He had the curious feeling of having passed into a different world. Only the young man with the beautiful eyes, noble forehead and musical voice seemed somehow or other a faint link with reality. He had the sense of living automatically. He had promised to go north. He must go. The summons had come from the King. It must be obeyed. His own will seemed dead. He set down his glass, empty.

"And the end of my drive if I come alone?" he asked.

"I am ashamed to call my home a castle," the young man admitted, "but it has been called so for seven or eight hundred years. There are three walls standing, two rooms over which a roof still remains. A few goatherds live in huts around it. An old man makes coffee for me and finds me food when I go there for the night. It is not often," he meditated. "I go to shoot bears in a few months' time. There are boars about now and a few deer but to shoot them is not easy, and to find their bodies in the chasms into which they fall sometimes impossible. I make no apologies, Mr. Beverley. You must sleep in your clothes. You can at least have hot coffee and you can be back here to-morrow night, and I promise you that you will imagine you are back in the acme of civilization when you reach this hotel."

Beverley, with unchanged expression, took up his hat and turned towards the door.

"I leave you for the present," he said. "Anything you have to say to me, Hayter?"

"Nothing, Mr. Beverley. It's a comfort so long as I am making this journey in a barbarous country that I have a young man who can speak English."

Rudolph accompanied Beverley to the ground floor of the hotel and watched him drive off in the car, then he mounted the stairs once more and re-entered the salon, where Hayter was busy with the whisky bottle.

"Let us," he suggested, "finish our conversation."

"I will have your proposition in plain words, Mr. Mauranesco," Hayter insisted. "It is against my principles, I tell you, even to listen to such a suggestion; but it is a mighty hard world to make money in, and I have not had the best of fortune."

Rudolph crossed the floor once more towards the door, locked it and came back to his place.

"It is the plain truth which I shall tell you, Mr. Hayter," he said, "and the proposition which I shall make is an honest one."

"Honest, be gum!" the Scotsman exclaimed.

"So far as you and I are concerned—yes. I shall give it to you if you wish upon paper." Listen to me, sir. That fragment of rock that my sister took over and showed to Mr. Beverley was bought in an antique shop in a back street here. It came originally, of course, from the Klast Mine. It was just a curiosity."

"So the young lady is in it!" Will Hayter sighed, shaking his head.

"My sister had no knowledge of where the fragment came from," Rudolph replied. "It is of no consequence to anyone, so far as I can see, but my sister believed my story that it had been found by me elsewhere in the kingdom. She took it to Mr. Beverley in all good faith. That does not matter. So far as I know, there is not an ounce of bauxite on my mountains. You have been over a part of them yourself and two German scientists have done the same thing."

"So you have been trying to deal with that fellow Treyer," Hayter observed.

Rudolph coughed.

"Whether I have or have not," he said, "is of no consequence. I want to deal with you now, Mr. Hayter, and this is the proposition I make to you. Mr. Beverley knows no more about geology than, say, my sister. He is utterly ignorant on the subject. He trusts implicitly in you. He expects to receive a report which is entirely discouraging. He only sends you up and follows himself in order to keep his promise. Very good. My proposal is that you give him a surprise. You admit that you have never been on the south side of the mountains—only the north. Well, you make your investigations, of course, where you like. If I were you I should find a quiet corner where you are not likely to break your neck and smoke a pipe and tell yourself that you are a rich man. What you have to do is simply this: You have to report to Mr. Beverley that you found indications of bauxite, that you followed them to their source, that you believe there is a large supply in an utterly unexpected spot. You can tell him that we have only waited for your report before turning another body of German investigators loose upon the mountains. You can tell him that he has had the first offer. I will do the rest."

"What might you be thinking of sticking him for?" Hayter enquired.

"One million pounds," Rudolph replied. "And of that sum you will receive one fourth. I shall give you my bond the day the agreement is signed."

"It's a risky business," Will Hayter decided.

"Not at all," the young man declared. "Remember we are not going in for leases or charters. I shall sell him the land outright and though it is not worth a sovereign a year to any man for grazing or any other purpose it is truthfully and legally Mauranesco property. The lawyer here has the deeds and there are copies at the law office,"

"No Crown rights?"

"No Crown rights whatsoever. It is a clear, straightforward sale I mean to make. I sell the mountain and Mr. Beverley pays me. If he is disappointed in not finding bauxite, it is you who will have to stand the brunt of it; but if you are a wise man you will be in America by the time he finds out and you will go with two hundred and fifty thousand pounds."

Will Hayter returned to the whisky bottle. He held the glass, which he filled liberally, in front of him and watched the bubbles of the soda water as he splashed it in.

"It is a great pity, young man," he said, "that you are no' a whisky drinker."

"I'll drink a bottle of wine with you on the way up," Rudolph promised. "What about it, Mr. Hayter? Is it a deal?"

"I'll just take the rest of that hour and a half to think it over," the Scotsman decided. "If they have another bottle of the same in the hotel, Mr. Mauranesco, we might be taking it with us. It will be cold on those mountain-tops and I will have to make a show of going over them properly. I will probably have to sleep out a night—perhaps even two."

"You shall have mules," the young man told him, "and a small tent. I agree with you, Mr. Hayter, it would be better if you were to make an exploration. As for the bottle of whisky, if it is to be got you shall have it. I will go downstairs myself and enquire."

He unlocked the door and descended to the bar. Left to himself Will Hayter, with his tumbler in his hand, leaned back in his chair and gazed up at the ceiling.

"Two hundred and fifty thousand pounds," he reflected. "Two hundred and fifty thousand pounds for making a wee bit of a mistake!"

Much of the splendour of the King's palace at Klast was faded splendour, but there was still plenty of ceremony. A footman handed Beverley on to a *major domo* on his appearance and the *major domo* conducted him to the apartment of Baron Genetter. The Baron welcomed the newcomer warmly.

"It is a very good affair that you have come, Mr. Beverley," he cried. "Nicolas is beside himself with anger. He believes that Katarina left him and came here to see you. He has sent a message to her villa and there is no reply."

"I have no idea where Madame is," Beverley said calmly. "She appeared this morning in the luncheon-room where I was seated with friends, she welcomed me in a manner which afforded me considerable embarrassment. I left as soon afterwards as was possible to go about my business. I have not seen her since."

"She has written you—she is waiting for you?"

"It is possible," Beverley admitted. "There was a note from her slipped into my hand by the manager when I returned to the hotel. She reminded me that I had once told her that 'Tristan and Isolde' was my favourite

opera and that she had come back to Klast to sing it to me, and I was to be sure and have supper with her at her villa at the conclusion of the performance."

"That woman is hell!" Genetter declared furiously.

"To that letter," Beverley continued, "I have made no reply. I do not propose to make one. The honour that she does me in seeking my company is entirely unsolicited. I have no wish to see or speak to her again so long as I live. Can I say more than that, Baron?"

"Why, no," Genetter acknowledged. "But are you going to live up to your words?"

"I most certainly am," Beverley answered coldly. "You should remember, with your wide experience, that Englishmen have not the instincts of the troubadour or the Lovelace. We are not always seeking for passing amours. I can give you my word of honour that I shall not approach this lady or respond in any way to her friendly overtures. I can do no more."

"But Katarina," the Baron said, looking at his visitor curiously, "she is a woman for whom the whole world has a passion. Great men have tried all they knew to carry her away. Nicolas knows it. He is never content when she is absent from him for twenty-four hours. You are a man of flint, Mr. Beverley."

"Whatever I am," Beverley replied, "I have no admiration for Madame Katarina except as a great singer, and any feelings that I have for her sex are entirely concentrated in another direction."

The Baron sighed.

"If only the King could hear those words!" he exclaimed. "Well," he added, glancing at the clock, "I must take you to him. He is walking up and down his room in a state of excitement. He will question you, Mr. Beverley. Tell him what you cannot avoid telling him—and I should forget the note."

"It is already forgotten," Beverley assured him. "Its ashes are at the back of the stove in my salon."

"Things may, after all, turn out better," the Baron observed hopefully. "The King has great faith in Englishmen. He is more likely to believe you than he would any other man in the world. He himself feels that Katarina is irresistible, all-conquering. If he knew of that note, the offer to sing for you and the invitation, I think that he would blow out his brains."

Beverley made no reply. The Baron took him by the arm and led him down the corridor to where a sentinel was standing outside a closed door. There was a rapid exchange of passwords. The door was opened. Beverley was introduced to the presence of the King.

CHAPTER XXIV

There was very little of friendliness in the welcome extended by King Nicolas to his visitor. He had already donned the undress uniform of his own guards, but his face was puffy, his eyes bloodshot. He had the air of one who has been indulging in a bout of unwholesome dissipation and is at the same time worried and distressed. The gesture with which he invited Beverley to be seated was in itself ungracious. Beverley, however, after his formal bow sat down and waited to be addressed.

"I wish to ask you a few personal questions," Nicolas began.

"I shall be very glad to answer them, sir."

"When did you last see Madame Katarina?"

"During the luncheon hour at the hotel," Beverley answered. "Madame presented herself there apparently to escape from an over-enthusiastic welcome on the part of the public."

Nicolas frowned.

"Humph," he muttered. "They did not offer me anything of the sort. Were you aware of her coming?"

"Certainly not, sir. It was a complete surprise to me."

"Luncheon—let me see," the King went on. "How did you spend your afternoon, Mr. Beverley?"

"I have been to the offices of the mine," Beverley replied. "Since then I have paid a call on the Sister Superior of the Convent of Notre Dame."

"And afterwards?"

"I returned to my room at the hotel. I was preparing for a visit to the north, together with my prospector, to examine a property owned by the Mauranesco family. I received your note and I came here at once."

"Then you have had no further conversation with Madame Katarina?"

"None whatever."

"Have you received any communication from her?"

Beverley considered for a moment.

"I had an invitation to attend the opera on Thursday, sir."

"What sort of invitation?"

"You will forgive me, sir, if I remind you that one cannot discuss letters one might receive from a lady with anyone."

"A matter of etiquette," Nicolas sneered.

"Entirely, sir," was the firm reply.

"You are proposing to visit the opera?"

"I fear not. I have serious affairs on hand and am making no arrangements."

"You are not proposing to visit Madame Katarina at her villa?"

"Certainly not, sir."

There was a brief silence. The King's expression was a little less gloomy. Beverley leaned forward in his chair.

"Perhaps you will allow me to make a brief statement rather than be cross-examined in this way, sir," he proposed. "Madame Katarina, they say, is a great singer and a great artist. She may be. I have never heard her sing, I don't suppose that I ever shall. There has been nothing in my deportment towards her to warrant these questions you have asked me, but there is no harm in my making a voluntary statement. I have not the slightest interest in Madame Katarina, I don't care if I see her again or not, and if it is your wish that I should do so I would willingly promise to keep away from the opera, never enter her villa, and consider our acquaintance closed so far as I can do so without being guilty of a breach of good manners."

"That sounds very straightforward, Mr. Beverley," Nicolas remarked after a few moments' reflection. "Madame has been a charming companion to me and is so still. She has one fault. She likes the admiration and attention of every man. This sometimes puts me in an undignified position. Hence my questions to you."

"If it interests Your Majesty to know it," Beverley continued, "my affections, such as they are, are entirely disposed of elsewhere. I am not a man who seeks adventures and there is not the slightest chance of my ever seeking one with the lady in question,"

"Genetter," the King said, turning to his secretary, "send in the whisky, two glasses and some soda water. You will take a drink with me, Mr. Beverley?"

"With pleasure, sir."

The whisky and soda water was brought and served. Beverley accepted also a cigarette.

"Will you now, sir, permit me to say a few words on my own account?"

"Certainly. I will listen to anything you have to say, Mr. Beverley," the King replied, with a marked increase of graciousness in his manner.

"It refers to the matter which brought me to Klast and which is, I must confess, a great anxiety to me. I am told that the election which is now proceeding will result in a change of Prime Ministers. It has been hinted that a motion will come before the House of Assembly to cancel my charter. This is not legally or morally possible and it would lead to grave unpleasantness. It will relieve me of some anxiety if I have Your Majesty's views upon the matter."

Nicolas moved uneasily in his chair.

"I must admit, Mr. Beverley," he said, "that I do not know much about constitutional law. I do not know whether another body of members of the House of Assembly have the right to cancel an agreement made by their predecessors. The lawyers must tell us that. Otherwise, I am afraid that what you have heard is true."

"What would be Your Majesty's attitude if you were asked to cancel your own concession?"

"I should have to be guided by the advice of my Prime Minister."

Nicolas' reply was almost too glib. Beverley was silent for a few moments.

"We should regard it as a serious matter, sir, if your Parliament decided upon any form of cancellation; but it would be worse still if they should transfer the charter we now hold to any other person or company of persons."

"Well, drink your whisky-and-soda and do not anticipate the worst," Nicolas enjoined. "Very likely Lavaroko will pull his adherents together and be able to form another Government. In that case the question will possibly not arise. It seems to me that you are trying to meet trouble half-way."

"That is not my custom, sir," Beverley replied, "nor is it so in this case. We have a representative here, as you know, and we are perfectly well aware that a foreign nation is endeavouring by all the means in its power to secure a supply of bauxite. You know this yourself. Its representative or rather a member of its secret service has had interviews with you in Paris. The doings of Mr. Treyer have been watched day by day for the last six months. It is chiefly through his efforts that Lavaroko was forced to resign and a great part of the funds which are enabling the Left Wing to fight so successfully come from him. We find ourselves, therefore, in a very serious situation. I have the interests of a great many of my fellow countrymen in my keeping, sir. There are altogether something like four million pounds of British capital invested in the Klast Mine. It would be quite impossible for us to submit to anything in the shape of cancellation of our charter or revocation of the concession granted by Your Majesty."

The King shrugged his shoulders.

"I am like all constitutional monarchs," he pointed out, "little more than a pawn in the game. You must wait until the new Government meets and you have ascertained the intentions of the new Premier. Then will be the time for your complaints."

"If I return to England and tell my shareholders what you say the situation would be insupportable," Beverley insisted; "there are several members of Parliament upon our board and there is not the slightest doubt but that they would at once demand from the Government protection for their interests."

"It will be time enough to consider that, Mr. Beverley, when your interests are seriously threatened," the King replied.

"I accept the rebuke, sir," Beverley acknowledged, "but although I am no politician, I can assure you that no British Cabinet would accept a change of Government in this country as an excuse for confiscating the property of an established English firm. The Union Jack is flying at the present moment over our offices. I need not tell you what the result would be if it were not treated with the respect it commands."

"A trifle melodramatic, my friend," Nicolas remarked. "This discussion is becoming fruitless. We must wait until the new Parliament is assembled and the new Premier has decided what steps to take. Perhaps, if you will pardon my suggesting it, we might now bring this interview to a close."

"Not a very satisfactory one, I fear," Beverley said, rising to his feet.

"Well, what are you going to do about it?" the King asked bluntly. "You will have to wait until the new Government is in power."

"I felt justified," Beverley ventured, "in asking Your Majesty's intentions."

"You have asked them and you have had my reply. I shall act upon my Premier's advice."

"With regard also to your own personal concession?" Beverley queried.

"The two go together," the King declared sullenly. "They must go together. You are a very agreeable person, Mr. Beverley, and on the whole I rather like you, but I am not going to risk assassination or deposition for the sake of your blasted mine. I shall do what my own ministers advise me to do."

Beverley sighed as he moved backwards towards the door.

"I regret very much that Your Majesty takes this view of the situation," he said. "Sir Walter Harding is, I believe, returning this week and will ask for an interview as soon as he arrives."

"Not a damned bit of use," was the sulky rejoinder. "Until the elections are over I have nothing to say..."

Beverley bowed his way out. Genetter accompanied him to the gates of the palace.

"You are taking rather an extreme view of the situation, I fancy, Mr. Beverley," the Baron said as he laid his arm on the other's shoulder. "You cannot persuade me any more than you could King Nicolas that England is likely to go to war just because a small country like Orlac, in a perfectly constitutional manner, cancels a concession. Compensation would be offered as a matter of course."

"There are other circumstances in this affair, as you and I both know," Beverley concluded. "We will not discuss them. It is perhaps useless."

"These damned Germans," Genetter sighed.

Nicolas rose to his feet a moment or two after Genetter and Beverley had left and drew on one side the curtain of the adjoining apartment. Katarina came slowly in. She had lost her colour and a good deal of her brilliant energy. She threw herself into the chair which Beverley had just vacated.

"Well, *carissima*," Nicolas exclaimed lightly as he resumed his place, "what do you think of this amorous Englishman of yours? You heard him?"

"Yes, I heard," she snapped.

"He does not seem quite so smitten as you imagined, yes?"

"Never mind," she muttered. "Get me a drink."

Nicolas rose a little ungraciously to his feet. He rang the bell, however.

"Not champagne," she cried. "Brandy."

A footman received the order and departed. Nicolas refilled his glass. For the first time that afternoon he was rather enjoying himself.

"You would like to have sung to him the 'Song of the Lovelorn Queen,'" he mocked. "You would like to have felt the fire of the love potion in your veins, yes?"

Her fingers played with the empty glass in front of her. There was a wicked gleam in her eyes. Nicolas, not for the first time in his life, was afraid of her.

"We will forget him," he proposed. "Come and sit by my side, Katarina. We will talk of things more pleasant than this cold-blooded Englishman."

She made no movement. The brandy was brought in. She half-filled her glass.

"Listen, Nicolas," she said at last. "You will do something to please me?"

"Anything," he assured her.

"You will do what he fears. You will send for Pravadia when his party are elected and you will encourage this idea of his. You will take away the mine from the English and give it to the Germans."

"Did you not hear me hint to him that this might happen?"

"No hints," she answered. "It must happen."

"If there is war," he meditated, "we might come rather badly out of it, little one. The Germans are not so easy to deal with as the English. The English are stupid, but they keep their word."

"The English are to lose that mine," she said. "If they do not, Nicolas, you will lose me."

"I would rather lose my kingdom," he declared, rising to his feet and coming over towards her.

A little sullenly she lifted her arms. She met his kisses at first coldly. By degrees, however, she drew him further down.

"It is a promise?"

"A King's promise," he whispered.

CHAPTER XXV

Beverley, when he reached the square on one side of which the hotel was situated, found all traffic suspended and the square itself filled with a mob of shouting and yelling people. The outside cafes all held separate crowds. People were leaning out of the windows. There was an indescribable and utterly incomprehensible roar of voices. The car had come to a standstill. Beverley leaned forward and spoke to the driver, who had a slight knowledge of French.

"What is it that has happened?" he asked.

The chauffeur pointed to a great white sheet hung from the roof of one of the houses. On it was roughly traced, in black, names and numbers.

"It is the five election results which have just come in, Monsieur," the man explained. "They are all won by the Left. The communists are going mad."

"Five results are not so many," Beverley observed.

"But Monsieur," the chauffeur went on, turning a little farther round and himself showing signs of excitement, "with these five gains Predor Pravadia must win. If every other seat was lost he would still have a majority. And of the other seats the constitutionalists could never win more than half a dozen. Pravadia will be the new Premier of Orlac."

The man broke off to stand up, wave his cap and join in the tumult of voices. He sat down, wiping his forehead. The ideas were racing through Beverley's mind.

"This Pravadia," he asked, "he is an avocaty is he not?"

"Without a doubt, Monsieur. He has an office the other side of the square."

"You can drive me there?"

The chauffeur smiled.

"If you would speak with Monsieur Pravadia," he replied, "you would need to be a magician. He is now at the Town Hall. He will be there until midnight. At this moment the citizens are tearing the coats off the backs of their neighbours to get near him. It is a great day for Klast, this."

Beverley stood up in the car and looked round. It was an amazing sight. The people were wedged together in one solid mass. There was nothing resembling a policeman to be seen, there was no order, no attempt to control the surging masses.

"Can you get me into the hotel by the back entrance?" Beverley asked.

"Through the garage, Monsieur, most certainly."

They backed away from the square down the street. In a few minutes Beverley found himself in the hall of the hotel. With difficulty he found his way into the manager's bureau. The latter, bathed in perspiration, welcomed him profusely.

"Monsieur Beverley," he gasped, "you see Klast on a great day. The people have broken down the constitutional government. No one knows what may happen."

"Listen," Beverley said, "I want to speak to Predor Pravadia."

"You might as well try to speak to the Lord of Hosts," was the prompt reply.

"So the chauffeur seemed to think," Beverley continued, "and yet I must speak with him. The chauffeur told me that he was at the Town Hall. He cannot live through a night like this at the Town Hall. Sooner or later he will come here."

The little Austrian was taken by surprise.

"How does Monsieur know that?" he asked.

"Pure guesswork," Beverley admitted. "Still, he's coming."

"And so?"

"It will be very greatly to your advantage, Herr Levenstein, if you arrange that I have an opportunity of a word or two with him."

"To-morrow perhaps?"

"To-night. I am leaving to inspect some property ninety miles away sometime to-night."

"What you ask is too difficult, sir. I cannot help you," the hotel manager declared hopelessly. "I will be perfectly frank. Mr. Pravadia meets three of his great supporters here in an hour. It will be difficult to get him into the hotel. When I tell you that he enters through the wine cellar you will understand how

difficult. We have a room for him and six of the sturdiest men of the city guard on duty there now. I have had a German gentleman who fought his way through the crowd and arrived here in rags. He went down on his knees and begged for what you are asking. I could not help him. I cannot help you."

"Well, at any rate I'm glad you did not help that fellow Treyer," Beverley said smiling. "Listen, Mr. Levenstein, will you sell me your hotel?"

"Sell it?"

"Yes. If you don't want to sell me the hotel, sell me the room where Pravadia is going to spend the evening—or lease it to me. For my apartments you are charging me, I think, something like four English sovereigns a night. For Pravadia's apartment, which I will cheerfully loan to that gentleman, I offer you four hundred English sovereigns."

The hotel manager flopped into his chair. For the fiftieth time that day he took out a silk handkerchief and wiped his forehead.

"Sell? How can I sell a room in a hotel?" he demanded.

"My dear fellow, it is simply for you to choose," Beverley went on calmly. "I will buy your hotel, if you like, or I will buy the room or rent the room—and the most lucrative thing for you would be to let it to me. Elections will not come every night, Mr. Levenstein. I am not a clumsy fellow. I shall not come butting into the apartment. I shall rely upon your tact just to get me there for a few minutes as soon as he arrives—perhaps before his councillors come. My business with him will not be lengthy. He will be as glad to see me when we have talked together as I shall be to have my talk with him. I am not speaking of money that is in the air, Mr. Levenstein. Four hundred pounds in Bank of England notes will pass into your hands when I leave Pravadia's room to-night."

The man's eyes glistened.

"But Monsieur Beverley," he protested, "with such princely sums to offer why did you not make your way to the Town Hall?"

"An apt question, Mr. Levenstein. I will tell you why. There are already a thousand people in it. There is not an inch to spare, a cubic foot of air to breathe. How could I speak a private word with Pravadia there? No chance. I want him alone to listen to just a few words from me. My only chance is your sitting-room. Shall I go to my room now and bring those notes?"

"But if he refuses to speak with you—if he throws you out? He is a strong man."

"All that I ask of you is the possession of the sitting-room. If I am thrown out of it you still get your money."

Mr. Levenstein had lost all power of resistance. Having been shouting at the mob and at his waiters and at the crowds who tried to invade his hotel for the last two hours, he had no voice left, either. He jerked his forefinger upwards.

"Bring me the four hundred pounds," he said hoarsely. "I will take you myself and lock you in the sitting-room. For what happens afterwards it is not I who am responsible. That is a bargain—yes? It must be understood, sir, that you are there—no one knows how. I run my risk. If the interview does not arrive I keep the four hundred pounds."

"It is understood," Beverley agreed. "I return, then, in ten minutes."

"Make it twenty," Mr. Levenstein begged. "I need to bathe my head. I need to wash. I need to drink a Pernod or some of your Scotch whisky. I am a man who has been through much to-day."

"Twenty minutes, by all means," Beverley conceded.

Up in the salon of his employer's suite "Will Hayter was lounging in a shiny, uncomfortable-looking chair with a soiled lace-covered pillow behind his head and a tumbler of whisky-and-soda by his side. He put down his pipe and swung round in his place as Beverley entered.

"We are to start?" he asked.

"Presently," was the swiftly spoken reply. "Listen, Hayter, I pledged my word to examine this tract of country although personally I don't think it is a damn' bit of good. Still, I swore I would go, and I shall go. It just happens, however, that time is valuable just now. Seen anything of that fellow Treyer?"

"He has been hanging around trying to pump me for an hour or so," Hayter admitted. "Then that angel-faced young Orlacian, Mauranesco, came running in to see if you were back and off went Treyer like a shot. Pretended he didn't know Mauranesco, and I saw the two at the bar together not a couple of hours ago!"

"Treyer's a dangerous fellow, though he looks such a simpleton," Beverley said. "Don't you have too much to say to him, Hayter. What I want to put to you is this: It will take two days to go from one end of the mountain ridge to the other, even if we don't break our necks. There is no need for me to go all the way. If I have to stay over in Klast to-night I want you to go on with Mauranesco, start work to-morrow morning, and I will come up later in the day as soon as I have finished here. I shouldn't come at all but I have pledged my word."

"You couldna' take it back, I suppose?" Hayter asked after a moment's hesitation.

"Why?"

The Scotsman pulled at his pipe for a moment in silence,

"That young Mauranesco," he confided, "I've got a queer idea about him."

"Get on with it."

"He's too beautiful for the rough stuff, I imagine," Hayter went on, "but I would not trust myself alone with him in a dark room, if I were you, Mr. Beverley."

"Why not?"

"I believe he's in with Treyer's people," Hayter declared, "and I think he covets that Klast Mine as the gentleman in the Bible, whose name I have forgotten, coveted Naboth's vineyard. To him, you are the Klast Mine. If cutting your throat was going to help him any and he had the nerve to do it you would be a dead man to-morrow."

Beverley laughed contemptuously.

"I believe the fellow would rob me or anyone else as soon as look at us," he admitted; "but you hit the right nail on the head when you said that he was not out after the rough stuff, I don't think that young man's a fighter. Still, keep your eyes open up north if he goes with you."

"I'll do that," Hayter promised grimly.

"Mind, as soon as you are there get straight away to work," Beverley went on. "I will follow you as soon as I possibly can. You need not have much to say to Mauranesco. Just tell him I have an appointment I must keep in the city here but that I shall be up to-morrow. What about your dinner? My movements for the rest of the evening will be a little uncertain."

"I've had a hearty tea," Will Hayter confessed, "and I have a good supper packed for eating on the way and something left over for breakfast to-morrow morning. The young man tells me there is neither civilisation nor convenience where we are going to stay, so I am laying in a few things and a bottle of whisky."

"Good man," Beverley approved. "If I don't see you again, Hayter, good luck to you. I need not tell you to look out for all the tricks. You know what I think about Rudolph Mauranesco."

"And," Will Hayter concluded with a grin, "I know what I think of him myself."

Ten minutes later Mr. Levenstein, with a blissful expression upon his pudgy face, was counting and putting in secure hiding at the back of his safe in the bureau four hundred pounds' worth of Bank of England notes. Beverley watched him, lounging in an easy chair and smoking a cigarette.

"Well, you have your money, anyway," he remarked with a smile as Levenstein concluded his task, reset the combination and closed up the safe. "Now what are you going to do about me?"

"I have had word from Pravadia that he will be here at ten o'clock," Levenstein confided. "At a quarter to ten I will put you in the sitting-room. I shall have to lock you up—that will be necessary. It is I myself who will bring Pravadia to the room, and I shall be as surprised as anyone when I see you there. I will make myself scarce though—and I will leave the key in the inside of the door. If you are quick you can lock it, then no one will be able to disturb you."

"Excellent," Beverley murmured.

"Come to me at half-past nine here in this office," the manager enjoined. "You've got an hour. If I were you I should go into the restaurant and have some dinner. You are looking a little tired, Mr. Beverley, if you do not mind my saying so."

"It's a good idea, anyway," Beverley agreed.

"I will take you in," Levenstein suggested. "They tell me the place is packed full, but I will find a table for you some way or other. Do you mind?"

They crossed the hall, crowded with people although the front doors were now tightly closed. In the restaurant pandemonium reigned but there were still a few unoccupied tables.

"None of the military here, I notice," the hotel manager pointed out as he installed his companion at a table. "They have been called out, I suppose. Word just came through that the King has arrived and demanded that his guard be doubled. I ask myself why he has come. If the Left go on as they are going," he continued, dropping his voice and glancing around, "I do not think that this will be a very safe place for King Nicolas...Until half-past nine, then, Mr. Beverley."

"I shall be punctual," the latter promised.

Levenstein took his leave with his usual courteous bow. Beverley ordered some dinner and looked around at the extraordinary crowd by whom he was surrounded. There were very few women. The great majority seemed to be townspeople half worn out with shouting and excitement, who knew they would get no dinner at home and who were in any case too restless to face a domestic feast. More than half of the younger generation were wearing only the long jersey and flannel trousers which seemed to be the popular day costume of the place. In a retired corner were two or three diners in dinner clothes and black ties, at a table presided over by an elderly man with grey hair. The waiter thought he saw curiosity in Beverley's eyes and whispered in his ear as he served him.

"That is the Speaker in the House, or rather in the last Parliament, sir," he confided. "He has come from his country seat to see the end of the fight."

"Will he be re-elected?" Beverley asked.

"Not if the Left get in. Count Zockaradi is a great constitutionalist and a firm supporter of the King. Ah, but tomorrow," the man continued in a tone of subdued ecstasy, "you will see a different crowd here. It is Katarina who sings at the opera. Man and woman will wear everything of the best. Everyone who can scrape the money together will be there to hear her. She is a divinity."

The waiter drifted away. Beverley ate his dinner without appetite or attention. Now that there had come a moment's slackening in the tension of the hours he felt again more poignantly than ever that strange aching depression which to his subconscious self had made the minutes leaden since he had passed out from the House of Passers-by that afternoon. It was internal torment to him to think of the things he might have said, the arguments he might have used, torment to think that his failure should be due to such a tawdry incident. He had been aching to send Marya a letter, yet what could he say that he had not already said? She had shown him kindness but never a gleam of affection. Perhaps he had been over careful in his own self-restraint. He had followed his instinct: it might have been a wrong one. A pitiful thought, but it haunted him...

Rudolph Mauranesco, in a long motor-coat and carrying a cap in his hand, came gracefully through the room. He stopped before Beverley's table with a friendly bow.

"Mr. Hayter and I are starting at once," he announced. "The roads are good and it is a clear night. I hope that when you arrive to-morrow you will hear a wonderful report. Bring your chequebook with you, Mr. Beverley. If Mr. Hayter discovers what I hope he will discover you will need it."

"I am not so sanguine," Beverley told him frankly. "Our German friends have been over your property, you know. They want bauxite—worse even than we do."

Mauranesco shrugged his shoulders. "That may be true," he said, "but there are times when geologists differ. Mr. Treyer seemed to me to scarcely possess the gifts of a mineral expert. I should have greater faith in Hayter. However, we shall see. We travel in my own car. The one you have been using is at your disposition whenever you send for it. Start as early as you can. It is a wild journey and a wild, barbaric place when you come to the end of it. I cannot offer you comfort or any form of luxury, for my home is in ruins, but it is possible that I may be able to offer you a great fortune instead."

"We shall see," Beverley replied, and despite himself there was a little kindness in his tone, for during one curious moment Rudolph's likeness to his sister had been insistent. It was gone now but the reflection of it remained.

"At any rate," Beverley promised as he lit a cigarette and stirred his coffee, "I will bring my chequebook."

CHAPTER XXVI

Levenstein kept his promise. He was even meticulously punctual. At ten minutes to ten, Beverley, who had been locked in the salon for barely five minutes, heard the sound of a key in the door. He moved a little into the shadows of the room. The door was thrown open. Levenstein ushered in the man of the moment—a huge, broad-shouldered fellow with strong features, leonine forehead and a mass of black hair which was badly in need of a brush.

"Here you can get the rest you need so much, Predor Pravadia," Levenstein pointed out in his unctuous tone. "Opening from the other side is a lavatory. Refreshments will be brought by myself personally in a few minutes."

The reply was incomprehensible to Beverley, for it was spoken in the Orlacian language. Levenstein, after a moment spent in transferring the key, slipped away. He had barely closed the door when the newcomer realised that he was not alone. The noise in his throat was rather like the growl of an angry animal. He shouted an unintelligible sentence. Beverley stopped him.

"You speak fluent French, Mr. Pravadia, I am told," he said, addressing him in that language. "May I beg for five minutes' conversation—five minutes only?"

"Who are you?" the other demanded fiercely.

"My name is Beverley. I am the president of the Klast Mine."

"What are you doing in this sitting-room? It is reserved for me."

"A long story," Beverley answered. "Does it matter? You are the man to whom, more than anyone else, I want to talk for five minutes. I have had to scheme to get here, I admit."

"How did you do it?" Predor Pravadia growled. "Levenstein is not used to breaking his word with me."

"I bought the room," Beverley told him. "I should have bought the hotel if it had been necessary."

"Just to speak to me for five minutes?"

"Precisely."

The man's fit of fury passed. There was a glint of respect in his fierce, splendid eyes.

"Go on, then. I admire your methods. I will hear what you have to say."

"You are going to be Premier of this country. It is reported that your party will require you to cancel the contract with my company, run the mine yourselves and use the money for your people."

"Well, why not? It is Orlacian land. You know where the profits of the mine go to now—half of them to Englishmen, half of them to the mistresses and wives of members of the late Government, to King Nicolas and his ladylove. All this time the Orlacians themselves have barely enough to eat."

"Idealistic," Beverley answered, "but quite illogical. Who is going to get the stuff out of the mine for you? Two hundred of the men who are working directing more than a thousand miners have learnt their jobs in the universities of the world. They are under contract to me. They do not come from the type of men who break their word. Without their brains the mine would run to seed in a week."

Pravadia passed his hand through his unkempt masses of hair.

"Well, I shall find out about that," he grunted.

"You don't need to," was the terse rejoinder. "I have come to offer you a better suggestion."

"What is it?"

"Leave the mine as it is. That will keep you out of international quarrels and keep you honest. It will be your fault in future if the share of the profits that goes to the Kingdom of Orlac is wasted in the way you describe. You must choose ministers who do not give the people's money away to mistresses. You must be content yourself to overlook the State accounts and see that the profits are used for the benefit of the people."

"You seem to be telling me what I ought to do," Pravadia growled with an ominous gleam in his eyes.

"I don't need to," Beverley countered swiftly. "But listen—this is my proposition. This is why I should have bought the hotel, if it had been necessary, to get these few minutes with you. I have a better offer. Leave the mine alone. I will help you in a saner way to provide proper dwellings for your people, to place the poorer classes in the condition they ought to be, to endow your hospitals, to subsidise your university."

"How?" Pravadia demanded, and the single word sounded like the report of a bomb.

"I will float for you bonds issued by the State of Orlac for a million pounds secured by a charge upon the customs, the railway and the public works of the place. The issue price will be ninety-eight and the interest rate will be four-and-a-half per cent. You will pay this easily enough if the country is properly governed."

"Look here, my young friend," Pravadia pointed out, "who the hell, in the places where money is, would buy Orlacian bonds? Nearly all the small European countries are bankrupt and most of them are in default."

"That is because most of them are so badly governed," Beverley answered firmly. "Remember, you will have the money from the mine coming in, and as to placing the bonds—don't you understand—I guarantee to do it for you? Have your City Treasurer print the bonds, I will launch them on the English market and my firm shall underwrite them. Do you know what that means, if they are properly underwritten as they will be? You will get your million pounds for a certainty."

"Who the devil are you," Pravadia demanded, "the Count of Monte Cristo?"

"I am the president of the Anglo-Orlacian Trust Company," Beverley answered coolly, "and our credit is worth a million pounds either in London or New York. There are plenty of men in the City of London who would float this loan for you if they had the same interest in the mine that I have and if they happened to be on the spot. The Klast Mine is a hobby of mine. My friends have bought shares in it—its reputation is my reputation. I don't want it touched. If I had to lose a million myself on your bonds I should still avoid bankruptcy. I should still have something to be going on with. Now you see why I wanted to catch hold of you before you went pledging yourself to confiscate my mine. I want you to sit down at that table

and write me out a promise that you won't touch my charter or interfere with the working of the mine; and I will write you a promise to hand you over one hundred thousand pounds this week on the strength of what you are going to write to me, and the remainder of the million as the bonds are delivered."

"Who else is in this with you?"

"No one."

"How do you know that your company will back you up?"

"I am the largest shareholder. I have what we call control. Half your city bonds I may have to keep myself, the other half I can dispose of. You can apply as to my standing to the Bank of England, for my probity to the first firm of lawyers in London. I want to come to terms with you before anyone else has a chance to get you to commit yourself to promises which it would be immoral for you to carry out and which would bring war to your country."

"What do you mean by that?"

"The Germans want the mine. They have been working behind my back for a long time to get it. That fellow Treyer has been to you. Nothing that he does or offers or talks about is straightforward. I have made you a brave offer. It won't ruin me if things go wrong but it will take a great part of my fortune. Things, however, will not go wrong. When I take things to heart as I have done this I do not fail."

"It seems to me," Pravadia grinned, "that you are the man who ought to rule this country!"

"I couldn't do it as well as you," Beverley answered. "For one thing I have no eloquence. I could not speak to the people and move them as you do. Another thing, I am not a politician."

"What about the King?"

"He cannot withdraw his concession if you don't withdraw your charter. You have only to be firm and say you think that the mine is being worked more beneficially under its present direction than it would be under any other conditions and that you are under an obligation not to withdraw, and he will have to do the same."

"Well, this is a nice end to a busy day," the man in the chair grunted. "Let me alone for a minute. No, ring the bell if you can get anyone. I want to drink and I want to eat."

Beverley would have touched the bell but his companion stopped him.

"Give me two minutes," he enjoined. "I cannot starve in two minutes. I want to think."

Beverley drew away from the bell and waited. Pravadia stretched himself out on the divan, a fine though clumsy-looking figure of a man. His clothes showed signs of a furious day's work, his linen had wilted, his tie was hanging loose, but although his hair was in disorder his hands and nails were clean, his eyes were clear—almost brilliant. There was not a single line upon his face that was not a line of thought. Beverley felt that those throbbing moments each had a peculiar dramatic value. The man might have been something of a visionary. He had almost that appearance as he lay, tense and concentrated, looking through the room, watching the pictures which his brain was conceiving, weighing possibilities, drawing slowly to a conclusion. It was rather like the dramatisation of a man's thoughts, Beverley fancied, as he watched. Somehow or other he was confident what the decision would be.

"Ring the bell now," Pravadia said at last.

Levenstein himself answered it, slammed the door to behind him, and turned the key. He was white with anxiety but at the sound of Pravadia's voice his face cleared.

"Bread and meat and a bottle of wine—red wine, Levenstein," the giant on the couch ordered. "Get hold of Kuniack, if you can—my secretary. He is somewhere jammed up in your hall below. Get something to drink for this amazing man who has forced his way in here," he went on, throwing out his arm towards Beverley. "How the hell did you dare to let anyone in here before I came? Tell me that, you miserable little Austrian."

Levenstein began once more to tremble.

"No one could have kept him out," he declared pitifully. "He offered to buy the hotel. Nothing would have moved him. He is one of those British who will not listen to reason. He is one of those men who never hear anything that they do not want to."

"Well, you have made a reputation here," Pravadia said, waving Levenstein away. "I am going into this place he says is a lavatory. I must wash. My skin is as dry as my tongue and that is pretty well burnt-out with talking. It is hours since I had a drink."

He vanished into the next room and there was a tremendous sound of splashing. He reappeared presently, his face aglow, his hair glistening with drops of water. He finished drying himself, looked at his nails, threw the towel back into the room and pushed a chair up to the writing table.

"Now, Mr. Beverley," he directed, "write out your part of the contract."

Beverley drew out a sheet of the hotel notepaper and wrote clearly and rapidly. He passed the result over to Pravadia who read it through without remark.

"Now I will write my piece," the latter said, taking Beverley's place.

He, too, wrote for a few moments. Levenstein reappeared just as he had finished, carrying a tray. Behind him was a waiter with wine and whisky and soda water, cigars and cigarettes. The tray of food and red wine was placed before Pravadia: the whisky and soda water was passed to Beverley. Pravadia chose the largest glass from the tray and watched it being filled. He emptied it to the last drop, drinking slowly but with an air of intense satisfaction.

"Brutes we are," he muttered as he turned to the plateful of meat before him. "Food and drink make animals of us. You dined at a civilised hour, I suppose, my amazing guest?"

"I have just come from dinner," Beverley admitted.

"I have touched nothing since twelve o'clock," the other remarked. "I could feel that wine sizzling on my dry tongue. Where is Kuniack?"

"He is outside," Levenstein answered. "They pulled him about downstairs but we got him through the crowd as well as we could."

"Send him in."

Levenstein stole to the door, opened it carefully, held out his hand and drew in a small dark man who was still breathing heavily and whose clothes were covered with dust.

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"Close the door, Kuniack," his master ordered. "Get out, Levenstein, for the moment. Come again when I ring. You might lock the door," he added. "What is the key doing this side?"

Levenstein glanced anxiously at Beverley.

"My fault," the latter admitted. "I ordered it there. I had to make sure of five minutes with you at any rate."

Pravadia laid down his knife and fork slowly. He looked at Beverley as though he were contemplating an animal of some unknown species. Then he recommenced his meal.

"Kuniack," he said, "you must find Dr. Halles."

"I know where he is, sir," Kuniack replied. "He is in the States office."

"That is like his impudence," Pravadia grumbled. "How does he know he is going to be Chancellor? Well, you have to fetch him, Kuniack, and tell him to bring his seal."

"Yes, sir."

"Tell him there are two important documents for him to sign and seal here and he has to manage it if he climbs on the roof and comes down the chimney!"

"I will bring him back somehow, sir," the little man, who had now regained his breath, promised.

"You see that gentleman over there?" Pravadia went on. "Beverley his name is. Mr. Beverley. This is Kuniack, my private secretary. He is coming into his own presently but he looks rather knocked about just now. He is not as strong as you or me but he has a brain like a finely tempered needle that does its work in the middle of a great block of machinery, I will give you a quarter of an hour, Kuniack."

"I shall be here, sir," the latter promised.

Beverley and the man who was still eating and drinking were alone once more. Pravadia suddenly looked up.

"You are right about those Germans, Beverley," he acknowledged. "They have been at me for a year now. Their consul here has had a few words to say, too. They are all right. They are working for their country. They want the mine for their aeroplane coverings—same use as you make of the stuff, I expect, only you have the patents and you have the mine. I will tell you what they have got from me—you need not be scared—they have got a promise that if I dispose of the mine they shall have the first offer."

"You are not going to dispose of it," Beverley remarked coolly.

"Now I wonder how you guess that," the other grunted. "Well, you are right. I am not. I like your way better. The only thing is—I hope you have not bitten off more than you can chew. Never had a failure in your life, I suppose?"

Beverley was silent for a moment. In the midst of this strange conflict he felt again the gnawing pain at his heart.

"On the contrary," he confessed, "I have just failed in a scheme that meant a great deal to me."

"I will bet it was not business."

"It was nothing connected with business."

"You will come out all right some day," Pravadia said cheerfully. "I like your methods, Beverley. You are the sort of man for a rough country like this. You go out for what you want and you will get it."

The man half-laughed, half-grinned at his uninvited visitor, his glass a little upraised, his fiercely lit eyes a trifle softened, his fine large mouth intensely human. It was a queer moment and the queerest part of it all was that Beverley suddenly felt that these few words meant something vital to him. His confidence in himself, which had received such a violent shock when he had found himself assailed by a vortex of feelings and sensations which were all unfamiliar to him, was curiously restored. He looked across the room almost in wonder. His imagination had received a fillip.

"If you say so, Pravadia, I begin to believe that I shall," he said.

CHAPTER XXVII

Dr. Halles, the Chancellor-to-be, was found and brought to the hotel. He welcomed Beverley with barely veiled surprise, but the two men were not strangers. Predor Pravadia sat in the background whilst they exchanged reminiscences.

"I had the honour of dining with you at the palace after the signing of your charter some years ago, Mr. Beverley," the newcomer said. "I had no official position then but I was the premier notary of Klast. We met several other times, too, in connection with legal matters. I transferred the property to you upon which you built your workmen's cottages."

"I remember it all perfectly," Beverley acknowledged. "I remember what a relief it was to find someone who spoke my own tongue."

"My name you may have forgotten," the Chancellor said. "It is Dr. Halles. I was at Oxford and I studied law also in France. It is—may I be allowed to say—a great surprise as well as a pleasure to meet you here. You have visited Klast at a very exciting time in her history."

"That is enough politeness," Pravadia broke in. "Now, Doctor, you are the only man who is sure of a place in my Government and you are the man to consult on legal points. Mr. Beverley has kidnapped me. I am here a prisoner. This room does not belong to the hotel. It belongs to Mr. Beverley. He has bought it from Levenstein. It is the English method, I suppose."

Dr. Halles was a little puzzled. He was a tall thin man with thoughtful face. He could have passed anywhere round the Temple or in the Law Courts as an English barrister.

"Mr. Beverley is worried, and naturally so," Pravadia continued. "He wants to know what we are going to do about his mine."

"That is one of the greatest problems we shall have to face," Dr. Halles acknowledged gravely. "We have the people to satisfy and the people have been harshly treated."

"The problem is solved already," Pravadia announced. "Mr. Beverley and I have come to an agreement."

The Chancellor's eyebrows were slightly upraised.

"Indeed?" he murmured.

"You think I am going too fast," Pravadia went on deliberately. "Well, why not? Facts are brutal things. You cannot get over them. I am going to be Prime Minister and I shall have a majority of seven to one. You think the people I have served since I was a boy and who have shown their trust in me to-day are going to refuse my first appeal? Not they. Fools they would be if they did. Now Beverley wants to keep his mine. I do not blame him. We need the money. The income derived from it that should have gone to the State has mostly been wasted. That will not go on longer because there will be honest men in my Cabinet, but there are other things to consider. We would be face to face with terrible troubles if we took that mine over. Chancellor. Mr. Beverley has been explaining that and I knew it beforehand. I worked at the mine myself for a time—been one of your employees, Beverley. My son-in-law has a job there now. I tell you a fact of which Mr. Beverley has just reminded me. They have two hundred trained men directing the miners. If we took that mine away those two hundred men are Englishmen and we would lose them. We have not the technical knowledge required to run the place and yet we need the money. This is Beverley's offer. 'Leave the mine alone,' he says. 'You will have all the concession money to use for its proper purpose, not let it be wasted as Lavaroko's people did. I will float a million pounds' worth of bonds for you on the London market—four-and-a-half per cent—and underwrite them myself.'"

"It is a great scheme," the Chancellor admitted. "Is Mr. Beverley sure that he can carry it out?"

"Absolutely," Beverley snapped.

"He is backing his opinion, anyway," Pravadia continued. "He is underwriting the lot and he is advancing a hundred thousand pounds. Halles, that hundred thousand will be damned useful. The treasury is empty—Lavaroko has seen to that—and even governing a State costs money, especially if one wants to inspire confidence. Read these two draft proposals."

Dr. Halles adjusted his spectacles and read the two sheets of paper which the Premier-elect had handed over. He laid them on the table before him.

"It is a wonderful arrangement," he pronounced. "The only criticism I would make—"

Halles paused and glanced meaningfully at his chief.

"Out with it, man," the latter enjoined.

"I do not know what commitments you have made to these emissaries from Germany and to the consul."

"Commitments be damned!" was the carefree retort. "Not a thing on paper, not even a spoken promise. I told that man Treyer that I would offer him the mine if we disposed of it. We are not going to dispose of it. I hate the fellow, anyhow. I like this Englishman's way of doing business."

Halles smiled across at Beverley.

"You seem to have made a hit with our future ruler, sir," he observed.

"I think I came just in time for all our sakes," was the confident reply.

"Of course you understand," Dr. Halles went on, "that these documents can only be accepted as a token of good faith."

"Out comes the lawyer!" Pravadia boomed. "Of course they are not in legal form. That is what you have to see to. The last returns will be in to-morrow. Nicolas must send for me within twenty-four hours. I shall accept office, nominate my ministers and everything will be in order in less than a week. Then you can draw up the proper deeds. We will give Mr. Beverley a banquet afterwards, even if it is not at the royal palace, then he can shoot back to England and know that his mine is safe. Ring the bell, Halles. I shall continue to drink red wine but one bottle of champagne we must empty to the new era."

Levenstein came sidling in. The obvious atmosphere relieved him of all apprehension. He hurried away and returned with the champagne. An extra glass was thrust into his hand. They toasted Beverley, they toasted the new Orlac, they toasted the coming premier. Then the latter got up and stretched himself.

"How are the streets, Levenstein?" he asked.

"Clear, sir. I have a room here, though, if you will accept it."

The crowd was singing the Orlacian national anthem in the square below. Predor Pravadia rose to his feet and kept time with the music with his head—rough, crude music it was, an unknown composer's harsh sounding words. Somehow or other it reminded Beverley of Pravadia himself—massive, dynamic, with just that touch of barbaric splendour in his speech and presence. The singing came to an end. The lights in the square began to diminish. Farewells were spoken between the four men. Beverley made his solitary way back to his own apartments. On the table lay a pencilled note from Hayter:—

We are leaving you to it, Mr. Beverley. This young Adonis and I have got my kit and we are off directly. If you decide to follow—although I can do all that is necessary in the prospecting—don't forget to bring that little gun I saw on your table. It is rough country we are bound for. Even our host—he has had his nails manicured this afternoon and looks more beautiful than ever—seems half afraid of it. And remember—there's no food and no drink.

I'm writing this to ask you, if you should decide not to come, will you send a car up to bring me back? I am not too fond of the job and I am not too trustful of the young man—and good reason for it, too. Knowing that it is no use your being there from the mineral point of view I should recommend you to stay where you are.

W.H.

Beverley tore up the note and threw the pieces in the waste-paper basket. Then he stripped off his clothes, took a bath and dressed himself in rougher kit. He looked at his watch. It was an hour after midnight. He had telephoned for the car but there was little chance of its being ready before dawn. He lay down on his couch with no idea of sleep but with almost a feverish hope of relaxation of body and mind. Every effort seemed to be in vain. The occasional footsteps and voices of a dwindling multitude kept him from even closing his eyes. The exultation of his great coup that evening faded from his mind. Slowly he felt his thoughts drifting back to that bare room with its sweet odours, its clean white stone floor and oak-panelled walls. Every now and then he fancied that he could hear the tapping of the trees outside against the windows...He sat up suddenly. Perhaps he had dozed. If so, the sound which had awakened him was repeated. There was a faint insistent knocking upon the door. He sprang to his feet and hurried across the room.

Beverley, when he had opened the door, stared at the figure on the other side of the threshold for a moment or two in blank non-recognition. Then those long white fingers lifted the veil from her face and he looked with cold anger at the intruder.

"Madame!" he exclaimed.

She caught his wrist. Apparently she feared that he was about to retreat.

"Hear what I have to say," she begged. "I am tired—worn out. I am nothing to be afraid of. Let me rest for a few minutes and speak to you. I ask nothing. You hear that? I ask nothing from you."

Beverley closed the door behind him and guided her to a chair.

"Madame Katarina," he remonstrated coldly, "you seem determined to involve me in trouble. I have no liking for him, but it is important that I should keep friends with your King. It is common gossip in the city that you are watched all the time by his spies."

"Not to-night," she assured him eagerly. "Nicolas is at his wits' end. The communists are winning the election. He and Lavaroko are alone together. I was dismissed. I went back to my villa. As soon as the tumult in the streets was over I came here. No one would recognise me. Everyone below is either asleep or drunk. I found my way here alone."

"And now that you are here?"

"I have been foolish," she confessed, "and I have repented of my foolishness. I may bring evil upon you from what I have done. I am here to warn you."

"Unless you have told falsehoods," he said, "there is no evil which you could bring upon me."

"It is not an affair of Nicolas," she sighed. "Please permit me? My headdress is too heavy and I have a raging pain."

She lifted her hat with its long veil from her head and laid it on the top of the divan. She smoothed back her hair with her hands. There was no trace of rouge upon her face, no lipstick, her eyes had been left entirely untouched. Such beauty as remained lay in the beauty of her supple body.

She had thrown open her cloak, as though subtly aware of the fact.

"You have another enemy in Klast besides Nicolas," she confided. "It is that young man Rudolph Mauranesco."

"Well?"

"Rudolph I have known since I was a girl," she said. "He has pestered me all my life. I mock myself of him always. He goes back to his little lights of love and the girls of the city and he forgets, but each time when I come back he flares up again. He is always troublesome."

"I really don't care about your love affairs or your flirtations," Beverley told her wearily. "What I need is a few hours' sleep. I start on a long journey at dawn."

"If you go to the Mauranesco Mountains," she warned him, "it may be a longer journey than you think."

"Anything definite?"

"Yes."

"I'm listening. Please make it brief."

"Rudolph came to the opera house where I was rehearsing to accustom myself to the range of the place. I have not sung there for months. In my dressing room, although my maid and two of the chorus were almost within hearing, he went through the whole of his silly protestations once more. I stopped him. 'You say that you would do anything in the world for me,' I said. 'Very well—I have an enemy—a man whom I hate. Challenge him to a duel and kill him and you shall have what you want.' 'You have only to name him!' Rudolph cried. 'It is the man who brought your sister from England,' I told him."

Beverley's face relaxed. He dragged up a chair and sat down.

"Madame," he said, "but you are droll! Englishmen do not fight duels. If Rudolph Mauranesco challenged me I should probably box his ears as soon as I had got over the shock. Is this your warning to me?"

"Not all of it," she answered. "Do you think that I have no understanding of Rudolph Mauranesco? He is a cheat and a Har and something of a coward, and although they tell me that he fences like no other man in the Orlacian army and is a deadly pistol shot, I do not believe that he would risk his life. On the other hand, he would commit murder just as easily as you or I might brush on one side an offending insect. You are going into the wilds with him. Could anything be easier than that he should shoot you at a moment when you were unprepared, come back and announce himself the conqueror in a duel and claim his reward?"

"You wouldn't believe him—nor would anyone else," Beverley scoffed. "He would be tried for murder."

She shook her head.

"He is cunning and you are unsuspicious. You do not take my warning kindly and you think because I have taken money from you I am a woman who is worth nothing. Still, I had to warn you. I am sorry now that I took your money, but perhaps it would not have helped me."

"Madame Katarina," Beverley said, "if you really are serious in saying that you wish for my affection you are quite right—it would not have helped you. It would have made no difference. I admire you, as everyone does. I should very much like to hear you sing and I should be honoured to count you amongst my friends, but for the rest the truth is best. I have failed in the only love affair I ever attempted. I have nothing left to offer any woman."

"I am beginning to believe that," she lamented, "and that is why I told you that you had nothing to fear from my coming. I shall not alter my life because of you but you have left a sad place in it. I let myself be carried away by a wave of hatred when I made that promise to Rudolph. I should never again have known a moment's happiness if I had not come to warn you. You are going into lonely places with him. Please be careful... You see, I am not so troublesome, after all," she concluded, rising slowly to her feet. "You can send me away now if you wish. You are the only man whom I have ever met who would do that when I willed otherwise, but you see I do not even ask for your lips. I go now, please."

He walked with her to the door.

"Katarina," he said, "I thank you for coming. It was generous of you. I promise that I will have my eyes upon that young man every moment we are together, and if my lips seek only your fingers," he added, as he raised them, "it is nevertheless the embrace of a friend."

She leaned towards him as he stooped his head and then, without the slightest warning, without any change in those brilliant eyes till the last second, she flung her arms around his neck, drew him to her so that her heart was beating madly against his chest and her lips clinging wildly to his. They stayed there—one kiss—and as suddenly as the storm had burst it was over. He stood gasping. The room was empty. Katarina was as light on her feet as a Valkyrie, as swift as the descent from the clouds. He had no time for a single exclamation. The door was closed—the room was empty. Slowly he recovered his breath. His head was in a whirl. Then he suddenly became practical. He bolted the door, made himself a drink with trembling fingers, lit a cigarette and drew up his chair to the window to watch for the arrival of the car.

CHAPTER XXVIII

At seven o'clock that morning Beverley saw the sun rise blood-red and challenging from behind the bare granite tops of the mountains above Klast. He leaned out of the window of the car to watch the medley of fierce colouring, wrapping his muffler more closely around his throat to keep out the increasing cold. The car came slowly to a standstill and the chauffeur jumped from his place.

"Engine too hot," he explained. "Water circulation not good. We wait for a time."

Beverley relapsed amongst the cushions wearily. It seemed to him that for hours and hours they had been taking those circular turns around the mountain, winding through the gorges, up again round and round until the engine had begun to knock as though it were ready to cough out its inside.

"It is far now?" he asked the man.

The chauffeur was tired and gloomy.

"God knows," he replied. "So far we have come but very little distance."

Beverley looked downwards over the unprotected ledge of the road. So far as he could see there was nothing but a succession of volcanic rocks, here and there a patch of scrub, then a small plantation of sparse shrubs, and after that more rocks.

"Which way is the chateau from here?" Beverley enquired.

"Chateau? There is no chateau," the man answered. "The ruins of it lie about on yonder hill. They are just fallen rocks. The remains of the castle are there."

He pointed across a mighty gorge at the bottom of which a river was tumbling down on its way seawards, a river which showed itself simply as a little streak of silver.

"Which way does the road go?"

The driver indicated the side of the mountain ahead of him.

"Round there. Twenty-four kilometres of vile road—a kilometre and a half across the gorge."

"Much more climbing?"

"The last fifteen kilometres all the time," the man groaned. "The chateau used to stand on a promontory hanging right over the precipice. The collection of stones they still call the chateau has the appearance of being about to roll over into the river at any time. The last Prince of Mauranesco who occupied the place looked over there so long that he could not lift his eyes. He shrank nearer and nearer to the ground and then he threw himself over—one thousand metres sheer. It was a month before they found the body."

Beverley passed a handful of cigarettes to the chauffeur, poured him out some whisky in a small cup and resumed his place.

"Drive on when you are ready," he ordered. "If you tell me any more horrors about this place I may find myself telling you to return to Klast."

"When the engine is cool," the man assented, emptying the contents of the cup at a single gulp and lighting a cigarette.

The sun was clear of the mountains before they started but soon afterwards was blotted out of sight. The mists rolled down and they could go no faster than a crawl. Beverley descended for a while and walked behind the car to thaw his numbed limbs. All the time he was making his way into the blank wall of white fog. In the end he was driven to keeping the palm of his hand against the shrubs and the granite rocks on the inside. The headlights which illuminated the road with a feeble radiance seemed only to make their progress more difficult. The driver was becoming hysterical.

"Not another metre," he kept saying to himself. "It is the journey of a fool."

They found slight shelter for a time in a pine plantation on the right-hand side of the road.

"Put your brakes on full and stop here for half an hour," Beverley suggested. "We shall hear if there is anything coming and we can get some big stones to block the wheels."

The man was muttering as though he were insane but he followed the suggestion. Soon the car was drawn up by the side of the road, partially protected by the closely growing pinewood, and the two men, wet through in spite of their overcoats, sat on the running board. The chauffeur dozed. Beverley was almost following suit when he fancied he heard a sound in the near distance. He sat up and finally struggled to his feet. As always, there continued the sound of the river below, reaching them in little more than a sullen whisper; but against that there was at this moment the shriller, more staccato noise of a motor horn. Beverley leaned over the driving seat of his car and blew the horn, waking, it seemed to him, a thousand strange mocking echoes from the other side of the precipice. The chauffeur opened his eyes and staggered to his feet.

"There is another car not far away," Beverley told him quietly. "I cannot tell whether it is coming up or down. Listen!"

The driver listened for a time.

"It is on the other side of the gorge," he decided.

"It is coming the way we came," Beverley pointed out. "It will be catching us up before long. Our back lights have fused, I see."

"Idiot!" Beverley muttered. "Have you a torch in your car?"

The man lifted the cushion of the driving seat and produced one.

"I will go back a little way and shout," Beverley told him. "You had better stay where you are. You don't seem too steady on your feet. Where will the next passing-place be?"

"A kilometre on," was the dismal reply. "You had better keep the light going all the time. If you turn it on suddenly you will frighten them into a skid."

Beverley nodded and began very slowly to climb the hill. When he came at last to the corner he stood there, and with his arm around a young pine trunk he leaned over the road with the torch extended. The sound of the approaching car was becoming very distinct now although there was as yet no sign of a light. Suddenly there appeared a faint glimmer upon the road. The car, which must have turned the corner, came steadily on. Beverley raised his voice but it was not until the approaching vehicle was within a few yards of him that there came an answer to his shouts. Pebbles flew into the air and with blazing lights and a violent shrieking of brakes the car came to a sudden standstill.

"Hello there!" Beverley cried in French. "There's another car in front. You cannot pass and our rear light has fused."

The driver made no answer. Beverley felt his way round the bonnet to the door. The window was let down. He flashed his light inside, flashed it into the white and startled face of Herr Treyer.

"Who are you? Has there been an accident?" the latter demanded.

"You will know who I am presently, Mr. Treyer," Beverley answered, lowering his torch. "There has been no accident. Tell your man to pull in to the side of the road. You had better stay where you are till the mist rises a little. You cannot pass us. Tell your chauffeur—he doesn't understand me."

Treyer leaned forward and addressed the man in rapid German. Inch by inch they moved in to the side of the road.

"You are all right here," Beverley said, resting his elbow on the frame of the open window. "Are you off to call upon Rudolph Mauranesco, Treyer?"

"It is my friend Beverley!" the other gasped.

"No, not your friend," Beverley objected. "We shall never be friends, Mr. Treyer. We do not like one another but we like the same thing. Is not that true?"

"What do you mean?" was the hoarse query.

"Bauxite."

"Is there any to be found in these mountains?" Treyer asked with simulated eagerness.

"I don't think so or you would have had it before now. I can't think what you are doing here, Treyer. I'm sure you have been over the ground long ago."

"Yes, I have wasted many hours exploring these savage hills," Treyer admitted. "But tell me this, Beverley—what is your man Hayter doing, coming up here with Mauranesco? He knows as well as I do

that there is no bauxite to be found, yet they left Klast together last night and Hayter had all his paraphernalia as though he were going prospecting."

"So you felt that you had to come along and see what was doing, eh?" Beverley asked.

"Of course I came along," was the eager rejoinder. "It is my duty. We manoeuvred Hayter into prison once to keep him out of mischief, but you bribed the governor or the chief constable and he was set free again. Where is he off to now with Rudolph Mauranesco? Those mountains are old stuff. There is nothing there. What are they up to?"

"I am exactly in your position," Beverley confided. "I, too, am wondering what they are up to. I, too, am on my way to find out. You look pretty pale, Treyer. What's done you in, eh? Are you worrying about the result of the elections?"

"It is this blasted climb," the other groaned. "The elections were bad enough—Lavaroko is nearly crazy—but if I had known anything about this awful weather—these fogs—these ghastly mountains—"

"You have been here before," Beverley interrupted.

"Ac^, but I approached them from the other side of the frontier," Treyer explained. "It is flat country round there. I will never make another expedition like this again at night. It is horrible."

"I can't think what you are doing it for now," Beverley speculated.

"I am following Hayter," Treyer confessed. "I know he believes there is nothing here. Why are you following him? There must have been some fresh news. Still, I really did not have to come," he went on with an unpleasant grin. "I think we shall have all the bauxite we want in a few months' time."

"Have any of these Orlacians got any to sell?" Beverley asked.

"They have the Klast Mine."

"They cannot sell that," Beverley scoffed. "It is British property."

Treyer chuckled.

"Well, well!" he exclaimed. "We shall see!"

"You know, Treyer," Beverley confided, leaning a little farther into the car, "you are a damned unpleasant fellow."

The German shrank back into his corner.

"You do not like me, I know, Mr. Beverley," he said. "I do not like you. As things are now, we are bound to be on opposite sides but there is no reason why we should not quarrel pleasantly."

"A quarrel like ours is never ended that way," was the calm retort. "I am a much stronger man than you are, Treyer, and the precipice just below is a four-thousand-foot drop. You are out all the time to do me mischief one way or another. Why should not I take advantage of this spot, this wonderful moment, and throw you over? No one would be very sorry for you. I don't suppose they would ever find your body even if they came to look for it."

"Be quiet!" a frightened voice shouted. "Why do you talk like this?"

"One must pass the time," Beverley said lightly. "You look pretty miserable. Don't you smoke?"

"I have finished all my cigarettes," Treyer declared.

"Drink?"

"I have nothing to drink. I saw Hayter and Mauranesco start out together—Hayter with his outfit—and I heard afterwards that you were following them shortly. Well, I just got this car, it belongs to our consul, and I came to see what you are all up to. There is the truth for you. Young Mauranesco is a bad one to do business with. He is very, very slippery. If you have a cigarette, Mr. Beverley, I should like one."

Beverley passed him a handful from his case.

"I have some whisky down the road," he said.

"I should like some!" the other exclaimed fervently.

"Well, I suppose, on the new principle of making friends with one's enemies, I must look after you," Beverley remarked, swinging away from the window. "Hold on for a few minutes."

He returned to his own car. The chauffeur, now wide awake, was awaiting him eagerly.

"They are going the same way as we are," Beverley told him. "It is a car from the German consulate. They are going to the Chateau Mauranesco."

The man spat into the open waste of the precipice.

"God help you all when you get there!" he muttered.

Beverley possessed himself of the whisky bottle and groped his way back. Treyer's fingers were blue with cold as he held out a paper cup.

"I thank you," he muttered. "I am sorry that I cannot drink to your good health. It is a pity that we must be enemies. Your drink, though, is warm. *Ach!*"

He swallowed almost the entire contents of the cup.

"Wonderful!" he declared. "I wish you were not the man, Mr. Beverley, who is keeping this bauxite from me. I do not like having to hate you so much."

"We are better enemies," Beverley told him cheerfully. "We should never get on as friends. Look here—the mist is rolling off. In ten minutes we shall be able to start. You cannot pass us here—not for a kilometre. If you run into us we shall both go over the precipice. When we get to the passing place we will crawl into the side and let you go. If you arrive at the castle first, order me a hot bath and a hot breakfast!"

Treyer's grin was unpleasant but sincere.

"You will see what you will get," he muttered. "I will do as you say, Mr. Beverley. I will instruct the chauffeur at least. He only speaks German. I will tell him to start when you start—I can almost see your car already—and that you will pull in and wait for us to pass a kilometre farther on,"

Beverley nodded and turned away. Down the road he stood motionless for a few minutes. With his foot on the running board of the car he watched with almost awestruck wonder the mists fading slowly away, disclosing with amazing distinctness the panorama below. The whole of the grim country grew clearer and clearer. More of it was visible every second—sinister, rocky, with occasional small patches of green pasture-land, not a human habitation, no signs of a town or village. A winding ribbon of road encircled the mountainside and disappeared. Beverley stepped into the car.

"Go ahead," he ordered.

The chauffeur blew the horn and recommenced the journey. At the passing place they waited. The German car crept by. Beverley caught just a glimpse of Treyer's evil white face with that fixed sardonic smile still upon his lips leering at them as he passed by. Beverley sighed. Unconsciously, he asked himself the question aloud:

"Would it have been murder?"

Herr Treyer's car travelled fast. For some distance they saw it in front, catching glimpses of it—a small object growing less distinguishable all the time. Presently the road improved. As they dropped towards the valley farmhouses appeared in the distance, groups of peasants working in the fields. Then they mounted again. The driver pointed with outstretched finger to a towering crag high above their heads on the other side of the gorge.

"The castle of MauranESCO," he announced with a grimace.

His passenger looked up in amazement.

"Do you mean that there is really a road up there?" he asked.

"What they call a road," the man answered. "To call it a mule track would be a compliment."

Soon they began the final ascent and were faced with a new horror. The mists came rolling down again from the mountain tops and with scarcely a moment's warning wind came also, bending the tops of the trees, lashing its way down the road, across the gorge, and blowing pebbles and small twigs and leaves into their faces. Three or four times the car was brought to a standstill and in the dark forest of pines stretching almost perpendicularly above them they could hear the sounds of the trees bent almost double, cracking with a report like that of a pistol shot. As they climbed higher the fury of the storm seemed to increase. A stinging rain took the place of the mist but brought with it an obscurity almost as complete. Still all the time they made progress of a sort, although the road itself became narrower and more terrifying. They reached a peak with a slight decline. The driver took advantage of a momentary lull in the storm to change to second speed and swung round a corner with his foot upon the accelerator. Then his frantic yell, the swaying of the car, the boughs crashing through the windows, the sudden darkness, robbed Beverley of breath—almost of his senses. His first thought was that the chauffeur had lost control of the steering and had driven into the wood. Then he suddenly realised what had actually happened. A large fallen tree lay across the road and they had driven full into it. The driver had lost his balance and fallen out onto the track. Beverley heard him yelling.

"Sautéz! Sautéz, Monsieur!"

The car was swaying over towards the precipice. Beverley sprang out and realised at once that his jump had been a little too violent. He himself was swaying on the edge of the precipice. Thousands of feet below he could see the thin little stream which was really a great river. He was hanging over the edge in space, his feet still clinging to the ground, his sense of balance strained to its utmost. He saw the woods below and in those few brief seconds it seemed as though they were rising up towards him. He saw the great stretch of granite rocks—then woods again. He seemed to be in the air—in the middle of space. The soil was giving beneath his feet, he felt a hideous impulse to abandon the struggle. Then he took the only chance. He threw himself backwards, lay gasping on the extreme edge, caught hold of a bough of the fallen tree with a frantic effort and pulled himself up inch by inch—inch by inch towards safety. He lay on his stomach in the middle of the road, a car wing by his side, fragments of the smashed windows scattered around him—but lying on his stomach secure, the solid flint-strewn road beneath him. After a few moments he felt unconsciousness slowly overwhelming him. He set his teeth tight. The driver pushed his way through the branches of the fallen tree and stood over him. Beverley clasped the man's hand and pulled himself to his feet. For the first minute or two he felt that his knees were like water. Then with a sudden impulse of relief he realised that the car was still resting on its wheels, although at a dangerous angle and with one tyre torn to strips. He thrust his hand through the jagged remains of the window and reached the bottle of whisky. He took a long gulp and passed the bottle to the chauffeur. The joy of the burning liquor trickling down his throat was almost incredible. Life was flowing once more in his veins. Even the rain beating upon his cheeks was reviving. Another drink—the giddiness was gone. His knees were themselves again. He looked at the car.

"*Qu'est-ce qu'on peut faire?*" he demanded.

The driver drew a long breath of immense relief.

"We shall see. Monsieur. I have something to show you."

He pointed a few yards into the woods and beckoned. Beverley staggered after him. There remained the still sap-bleeding stump from which the tree had been torn. The whole length of it was there—little twigs, a depression, a few yards of turf, broken fragments of the boughs.

"That tree," the chauffeur pointed out, his black eyes blazing with passionate anger, "fell ten metres from the road. Look at the footsteps all around. It was dragged onto the road to wreck this car. C'est formidable. Monsieur"

It took Beverley only a couple of minutes to realise that the man was speaking the truth.

"The German car!" he cried.

"The car that passed us was pulled up four metres away, Monsieur," the driver continued. "You can see the marks of the tyres. You can see where it stood. It was the monsieur to whom you gave the whisky," he concluded, pointing downwards into the mighty gulf. "That is where he wished us to be. The driver and he pulled the tree across the road. It was easy enough."

"We were lucky," Beverley said quietly. "Come along and see what we can do to the car."

They commenced their investigations. The glass in the windows was shattered, one door was smashed to pieces, the axle was slightly bent. The torn tyre hung in shreds around the bare wheel. The spare wheel, however, was undamaged. Beverley, who was something of a mechanic, took off his coat and set to work. Hours passed but they made a job of it; and in due course, moving slowly and very cautiously, they started on the last lap of their journey.

At eight o'clock that night they limped into what had once been the courtyard of a castle. Through the remains of a doorway they passed from room to room—roofless, with only a fragment of the walls standing—until the driver pointed out a thick oak door which still hung on its hinges.

"Two rooms are left there," he announced. "It is all that remains."

Through the chinks there came a gleam of light. Beverley knocked in vain but the sound of voices inside was clearly audible. He turned the mighty handle and pushed with his shoulder. The door yielded and he crossed the threshold, followed by the chauffeur.

CHAPTER XXIX

"Mr. Beverley!" Rudolph Mauranesco cried joyfully as he sprang up from a chair in front of the huge log fire. "Wonderful!"

He came forward with outstretched hands. His sole companion in the room, "Will Hayter, had also risen to his feet. He held his pipe in his hand. There was a look of great relief in his wrinkled face and shining out of his keen blue eyes.

"We were commencing to worry a wee bit about you, Mr. Beverley," he said.

Beverley advanced into the little circle of illumination afforded by the leaping flames and returned their greetings. They looked at him—Hayter especially—in horror. His clothes were torn and muddy, he was wet through to the skin, there were patches of blood about the sleeves of his coat and trousers and a cut on his forehead. He walked with the stiff motions of one who is not sure of his strength.

"My dear sir," Mauranesco exclaimed. "You have had an accident—something has happened!"

"We have had a terrible ride over the mountains," Beverley explained a little shortly. "I am wet through. There's a gale blowing in the pass and we ran into a tree. I see you have no lack of heating here, at any rate. Could I have a hot bath or something? I have dry clothes with me here. But first—where is Treyer?"

"Herr Treyer?" Rudolph repeated. "I have no idea."

"But he passed us on the way here," Beverley insisted.

The young man shook his head.

"Then I tell you," he said, "what must have happened to him. There is a small settlement of goatherds' cottages five or six miles farther on, half-way down to the valley. He stayed there last time he was here. It is nearer the slopes where he thought he might find bauxite. He has probably gone on there."

Beverley glanced enquiringly at Hayter.

"He has not been near here," the latter declared. "I have been out all day but I came in an hour ago and I have seen no trace of him."

"I need not say," Rudolph apologised, dismissing abruptly the question of Treyer, "that we have nothing in the shape of a bathroom. You may as well know the worst at once. This is the only room with four walls standing that remains of the old castle. We bunk in here, cook on that other fire—nothing else to be done."

"It is gloriously warm, anyway," Beverley remarked. "I warn you though—I must take off my clothes by that other fire."

"And if you do, be sure you don't interfere with what is cooking there," Will Hayter begged. "They seem a trifle short of stores up here and Mr. Mauranesco took out his gun and shot a wild deer. The woodman skinned it and there's a good half of it stewing in that pot."

The tin bath and hot water were brought in by a wild-looking individual, Beverley stripped, took an impromptu bath, rubbed himself dry on an ancient piece of towelling and changed into a spare suit of clothes. The driver declined the tub but washed and changed some of his wet apparel for a rough shepherd's coat. He went out to the woodman's compound and Mauranesco, with a word of excuse, followed him.

"No luck, I suppose?" Beverley asked his remaining companion,

"As you're decent, man, I'll come over and talk to you now," Hayter replied as Beverley drew on his trousers.

"You look as though you had had a few shocks to-day. Here's another for you. I have found bauxite."

Beverley was proof against surprises.

"Where?"

"On the south side. Where we never expected to find it. Every indication was against it. That's why Treyer and his little company of geologists left the ridge alone. But it's there—and it's not planted."

"Take your oath on that, Hayter?" Beverley asked, looking at him shrewdly. "You must remember what Mauranesco is."

"I'll take my oath on it," Hayter repeated. "It is beyond doubt, Mr. Beverley. There's bauxite there. By this time to-morrow I'll know whether it's worth sinking a shaft for."

Beverley drew on the remainder of his clothing thoughtfully.

"Anything else to tell me, Hayter?" he enquired.

"Not a thing. Apart from the bauxite I don't like this place, I'm not liking the young Mauranesco, and I'm hating the whole job."

"Does he know how you feel about things?"

"Am I a fool?"

"Where do you sleep here?"

"In a rug or any old covering I can find in front of the fire. The young gentleman sleeps in front of the other fire."

"Are there no servants?"

"Not what you would call servants. A couple of lads and the wife of one of the woodmen come in. The woman boils the kettle in the morning. It's rough, Mr. Beverley—that's what it is."

"My car will never take us back," Beverley confided. "What about Mauranescos'?"

"There's room for three and he's likely to be well disposed towards us if you drop him a hint that my report is more favourable than you expected. He's hard pressed for money, I can tell you that. The sight of a pound note sets him trembling. It's my belief he would be a raving lunatic if he guessed that there was nigh upon a fortune for him in that ridge of his."

"Keep quiet about it till I give the word."

"I'll do that," Hayter promised.

Beverley threw himself into a hard wooden chair. A great fatigue was stealing over him.

"You haven't a drop of that whisky left, Hayter?" he asked.

"I'm like all Scotsmen—I'm selfish about my whisky, but I'm no' so selfish as all that," Hayter replied.

He produced the bottle from the pocket of an overcoat hanging up behind the door. He found a glass, too, and passed it across. Beverley sipped its contents slowly.

"For a temperate man," he confessed, fighting with an overpowering sleepiness, "I have drunk a good deal to-day. What is that delicious odour?"

"It's the venison cooking. I'll say this for the young gentleman—he picked off that beastie with his rifle in fine style."

"I'll stay awake till I've eaten something," Beverley decided.

Soon Rudolph returned, full of apologies, with a coarse tablecloth on his arm, followed by a woman carrying plates and knives and forks. A strange bottle of red wine, the fierceness of which had gone with the years, was added to the feast. The venison was served up in a steaming tureen. Salt and vegetables were absent but a great cake of rye bread, almost black in colour, embellished the lower half of the table. There was very little in the way of conversation. Their host asked one question before he finally settled down for the night.

"Is there any chance for me, do you think, Mr. Beverley?"

"There might be," was the cautious reply. "Hayter's been telling me that the southern slope doesn't look quite so hopeless as the other side of the ridge where he spent most of his time when he was here last. Will you answer me a question, young man? It may mean a good deal to you that you answer it truthfully, that you keep nothing back from me."

"There is nothing to keep back," Rudolph replied. "Go on."

"To whom do those mountains belong?"

"Every yard of them belongs to the Mauranescos," was the prompt reply.

"And who are they?"

"My sister and I. No one else has any sort of claim."

"Have you raised money on the property?"

The young man laughed bitterly.

"Who would advance a penny on it, sir? I owe the lawyer who has the deeds and who is supposed to be in charge of my affairs a matter of three hundred pounds. If you were to advance a few thousands upon our chances he might deduct that."

"No other claim? No dealings with Treyer, for instance?"

"Before God, no," Rudolph declared. "He went over the property with practical men and I am afraid I must tell you that they decided just what Mr. Hayter always said. You see I am being quite frank with you. They found no bauxite but they made the same mistake apparently as he did. They only tried the northern slopes. They scarcely visited the other side at all where Mr. Hayter has been all to-day."

"I am not prepared to make a report at present, young man, remember that," Will Hayter said. "I don't want to disappoint you, but against my own convictions I will admit that I found some traces of the stuff we are looking for. It all depends upon to-morrow."

"You will start early," Mauranesco begged. "I will see that you get your coffee—if I make it myself. The mules will be round at daybreak."

"I will be ready," Hayter agreed, "but if it is all the same to you I would like you to choose an animal that takes the job a bit more seriously than that beast I was on to-day. There he was," the Scotsman observed wrathfully, "frisking around as though it were an early spring morning. Find me an animal that will just attend to business and I will be obliged to you, Mr. Mauranesco."

"You shall have it," the young man promised. "Do not be afraid that we shall not take great care of you. You are worth your weight in gold to us."

There followed a night of heavy sleeping. At dawn the little cavalcade left the castle ruins and made their way to the spot which Hayter had indicated. Mauranesco was too restless to join them. He went off through the woods with his gun...For six solid hours the little Scotsman had no word to say to Beverley or to anyone else. Occasionally he paused to refill his pipe. Then he went at it again with a hammer in his hand and thick glasses protecting his eyes. Now and then he took a spell of digging. Occasionally he produced a bottle of chemical and rubbed a piece of stone which he had chipped off with it. Soon after midday, Beverley brought forth a chunk of bread and some cold venison and sat on a rock munching it, gazing around him with amazement at the extraordinary panorama. Presently Hayter came over and joined him, produced his own packet of food, the whisky flask and his pipe.

"I'm through," he announced.

"Well?"

"It's there. It will be worth sinking a shaft a dozen times over. I'm not saying it is the same as the Klast Mine, but I'm believing that it is the second best in the world."

They heard the sound of Rudolph's gun in the wood below, Beverley smiled.

"Let's hope he has shot us something worth eating for dinner," he remarked.

"The young fool," Will Hayter reflected. "It's bad hands the money is going into. But there's the young lady—she's different."

"Yes," Beverley agreed, "she's different."

CHAPTER XXX

On their homeward journey they came upon Rudolph Mauranesco plodding along the mountain track close to the chateau, his gun under his arm, carrying a brace of pheasants in his left hand. He quickened his pace at the sight of them. Beverley reined in his animal as he caught a glimpse of the young man's face, haggard with anxiety.

"You're in luck, my friend," he told him as he came panting alongside. "Hayter says the yield would not compare with the Klast Mine, but it might be worth sinking a shaft or two. We will try and do a little business with you."

Rudolph wiped the perspiration from his forehead.

"Do it quickly," he begged. "Let us do it quickly before Mr. Hayter—"

"Before Mr. Hayter what?" Beverley asked curiously.

"Oh, he might change his mind," Rudolph explained hastily. "I am afraid of his producing a row of figures and trying to get you to hold off for a bit. It is the Scotch people, is it not, who are so careful of spending money?"

"It is I who have to do the business with you," Beverley told him, "and I am not Scotch."

Rudolph glanced up at him.

"There is Marya," he said.

"Naturally."

"I hope it will not be too small a sum," Rudolph went on nervously. "A man must have money nowadays but Marya in the convent has no need of it."

"That is for her to decide," Beverley observed. "She must have her share of it."

Rudolph sighed.

"We must talk again about this before we go to the notary," he said. "Can you start back to-night, Mr. Beverley?"

"My dear fellow," was the emphatic response, "don't for heaven's sake think that I am depreciating your hospitality but it will be one of the happiest moments of my life when I quit your ancestral home and feel the warmth of a city around me again. You see we don't have adventures like this in London. Have you seen anything of Mr. Treyer?"

"I think so," Rudolph replied after a moment's hesitation. "I saw three men putting up a tent shelter, still on the north side where no one has found any bauxite yet. It must belong to Treyer. That man—he is a devil. He has it in his mind that he is being cheated, that everyone is deceiving him, that he is letting chances slip through his fingers. He does not understand why you are here. I think he would be dangerous if he could."

Beverley laughed scornfully.

"Oh, he's done his best already," he observed.

"Mr. Beverley," Rudolph continued earnestly, "there are two reasons why I should like to get you away from this place. One is for my own sake. I want to get you to the notary, I want to show you my title deeds, I want you to make some sort of offer for the bauxite. I need the money—oh, so much worse than I can tell you. And secondly—I am not a coward, Mr. Beverley, you will not think that, but I am a little afraid of Treyer. He deceives himself. He reproaches me. He thinks that I have promised this, that I have promised that. The fact of it is, he is not a clever man at looking for bauxite. Mr. Hayter has known the place to search. Treyer has always missed it. Mr. Hayter has found it. Treyer has searched in vain. Treyer cannot buy my mountain because he has found nothing there. With you an arrangement is possible, but Treyer, he will be a madman when he knows that he has let a great chance slip through his fingers. We must get down to the city and finish the business as quickly as possible."

Beverley looked at the young man keenly.

"I expect, Mauranesco," he said, "that you have made him all sorts of promises."

"Not so," Rudolph protested. "I have given him the opportunities. I have said—search my mountains. I have said—come to me with an offer. He has had more opportunities perhaps than you have. He has found nothing. He makes no offer. Very well. All that I say is—let us get away from here before he knows what is happening."

"I am as anxious to get away as you can be," Beverley replied, "but why on earth should we hurry from this place because of Treyer?"

"Because he is dangerous," Rudolph declared fervently. "He is a man who does not care how far he goes in violence."

"But he is here alone," Beverley pointed out. "He could do nothing. You have servants here. I imagine that either you or I could deal with Mr. Treyer if he got troublesome."

Just at that moment Rudolph had not the appearance of a young man able to deal with anybody. There was, without a doubt, a look of fear on his face.

"Treyer carries firearms," he said. "I do not like a man who carries firearms. A coward can kill with firearms as easily as a brave man. And as to those you call my servants—I have no authority over that troop of brigands."

Beverley nodded.

"Well, I see your point, Mauranesco," he conceded. "We will get away just as soon as you can start your car up. I cannot say more. Hayter is ready—I am ready. We will take those excellent pheasants with us, if you like, but although your mountain air here gives one a terrible appetite I think on the whole I would rather feel myself on the way back to Klast than spend the night here with Treyer hanging around."

"In ten minutes," Rudolph promised, "you shall hear the throb of my engines. It will be a dark night but we will sup at the hotel."

They had reached the ruins of the castle and Rudolph hurried away to the shed where the guns were kept. Hayter, who had pushed on ahead and had taken no part in the conversation, returned from the far end of the room where he had been washing vigorously, still rubbing his head with the remnants of a towel.

"The young man is right, sir," he declared. "The sooner we are out of here the better."

"A less attractive spot," Beverley confessed, "I have never come across in my life, but I must say I cannot understand this sort of mysterious fear you both have of Treyer. The only quality I have found in him is persistence. He hangs on like a certain type of reptile. But what is there to fear about him?"

"I'm not saying that I'm afraid," Hayter explained. "I have faced trouble too often in my life, but when I do feel a moment's uneasiness it is always about a man of Treyer's type. The honest, straightforward savage I have met and dealt with pretty often in my younger days. This fellow, I honestly believe, is up to mischief even at this moment."

"I don't see what possible harm he could do us up here," Beverley reflected.

"Well, I'll tell you," Hayter went on. "I believe this is his fourth visit to the mountains. He has made friends with some of those small herdsmen around the other side half-way down to the village. They are practically all barbarians. He's learnt some of their lingo and what he says to them I cannot tell, but he talks to them hour after hour. It is with them he stayed last night. I stood up to stretch myself about an hour ago and there he was in the distance pointing towards us and gesticulating."

"But they are Mauranesco's men," Beverley objected. "They have nothing against us."

"They're half-witted," Hayter replied doggedly. "He's actually managed, as I told you, to learn a little of their language and he's been drilling something into them all the afternoon. My belief is he's trying to make mischief for us somehow or other."

"Might as well be on a savage island anyway," Beverley muttered, "but neither you nor I will need to come up alone again. In five minutes now we are off again in Rudolph Mauranesco's car and with luck we shall have a hot meal and a bottle of wine where the lights are blazing in a few hours."

The Scotsman's eyes glistened. He opened the door of a cupboard and looked at the diminished contents of his bottle of whisky.

"We'll just have a wee drop, sir," he said. "There's enough left for that—just a stirrup cup. There's water in the carafe there. The young gentleman said it came straight from one of those mountain streams so we can fancy we are back in Scotland. Half-and-half, eh? Takes the body out of the whisky and the soul out of the water, as they say."

They set their glasses down empty. Hayter's had been full to the brim, Beverley's rather less than half-filled.

"And now," the latter proposed, "I think I will go and see if that young man is ready for us. The ten minutes are about up."

"I'll follow you with pleasure, sir," Hayter agreed.

Before they reached the door, however, it was thrown violently open. Rudolph half-ran, half-staggered in.

"Mr. Beverley," he cried, "I have come to warn you, sir! Treyer is here with a lot of the herdsmen. They are all crazy."

Beverley buttoned up his coat. "Well, where's your car?" he asked. "I don't like running away from anybody, but—"

"They pushed me away from it," Rudolph interrupted. "I tell you it is serious trouble, Mr. Beverley. There are a score of them at least."

"They pushed you away, did they?" Beverley said calmly. "Well, we'll see v.^hat they do to us."

Before he could reach the door, however, it was again thrown wide open. A confused stream of men pushed their way in—strange, savage-looking creatures, some of them barefooted, others wearing odd fragments of peasants' attire, all of them with dried goatskins in the shape of capes around their shoulders and one or two of them in goatskin trousers. In their midst was Treyer. The door was closed with a bang. The eyes of every one of them seemed fixed upon Beverley, and the light in their eyes was evil and murderous,

"Is this an evening call, Treyer?" Beverley asked. "Won't you introduce your friends?"

"You will need no introduction," was the half-lisping, half-snarling reply. "I will tell you why they are here. They are goatherds of the Mauranesco Mountains. They and their fathers and grandfathers before them have built their shanties and lived in the sheltered corners, tended their goats and made a living somehow or other. They have the idea—such a stupid idea, Mr. Beverley—that you have come to upset all that. They will not listen to reason. They think you want to dispossess that poor young man, Rudolph Mauranesco, of his property, dig holes in the ground and destroy the herbage which feeds their goats. Perhaps you can reason with them."

"I should be delighted," Beverley answered, "but I might as well talk to the goats themselves. They would not understand a word of anything I said."

Treyer grinned and there was a very unpleasant light in his narrow eyes.

"Dear me, that surprises me, Mr. Beverley," he said. "I should have thought that you were too astute a business man to have come to a country to buy property and beg concessions when you did not understand the language of the people. Very difficult, this situation, I fear."

"I am sure," Beverley suggested, "that you would be an excellent interpreter. Why not tell them that our coming will do them no harm but will bring them vastly increased prosperity?"

Treyer indulged in that repulsive gesture of which he was so fond—he laid his finger against his nose.

"I know so little of the language myself," he said sorrowfully, "that I might make mistakes. I should be a bad one to help you in a critical moment like this, Mr. Beverley."

"I can quite believe it," was the terse rejoinder. "Still, I should like to fully understand the matter. Precisely what have they come here for? Why are they carrying those sticks? Why do they all keep pointing at that huge locked door with the key on the nail above it at the other end of the room?"

"I wonder," Treyer answered. "I wonder that myself. They seem to have got it into their minds that your coming here means the end of their long years of liberty, living rent-free on these mountains which—God knows why—they love. They do not like you, Beverley. I came with them," he went on with a malicious grin, "thinking I might mollify them. My arguments seem only to make them worse. I am really afraid that it is quite an unpleasant situation."

"Are you listening to all this, Rudolph Mauranesco?" Beverley asked, raising his voice a little.

Rudolph came shivering from a remote corner of the room.

"I have heard everything," he whined. "It is awful—awful—awful! I have been arguing with them outside. This is the trouble, Mr. Beverley. They have no brains—they do not understand. I have told them there will be plenty of the mountains left whatever you do. They do not believe me."

"Then what is it they propose?" Beverley asked.

There was a moment's silence. Then the whole crowd began to shout. They shouted three words only and kept repeating them. All the time they pointed towards the great locked door. Beverley waited until the tumult had subsided a little then he raised his voice once more.

"What the devil do they mean, Mr. Interpreter?" he demanded.

"What they shouted," Treyer confided with mock horror in his tone, "was just three words. These three: 'The Strangers' Gate!'"

"And what might they be meaning by that?" Hayter enquired, removing the pipe from his mouth.

"It is a reference to one of their old customs," Treyer replied. "Ask your dear friend Rudolph Mauranesco there. He will explain."

Rudolph was as white as a sheet. Beverley looked at him curiously. It was a hard thing to realise, but he came to the conclusion that the young man was not acting in the least. He was suffering from a perfect paralysis of fear.

"What is it they want from me, Mauranesco?" Beverley demanded. "What is the meaning of 'The Strangers' Gate'?"

"From hundreds of years ago," Rudolph explained, "there has been warfare between the Princes of Mauranesco and the Barons across the frontier. There were raids continually. If the chiefs of my race took any prisoners they brought them here and—"

The young man broke down. Beverley watched him wipe the perspiration from his forehead.

"Go on," he said encouragingly. "Let's hear the worst."

Rudolph pointed down the vast apartment.

"It is the door there," he faltered. "We keep it firmly locked in these days. You asked about it when you came. If it is opened, it opens sheer over the precipice. One step over the threshold is eternity. When the people of the hills here had prisoners they brought them to the chateau and sent them home through The Strangers' Gate."

There was a hoarse muttering from the motley company of savages as one or two of the foremost edged their way nearer to Beverley.

"I conclude then," the latter said, "that they are paying me this little visit with the idea of treating me as an enemy and pushing me through The Strangers' Gate."

"And Hayter, also," Rudolph put in. "I have seen them stand watching him hammering at those rocks for hours at a time and I have wondered what they were thinking of. I know now. They look upon Hayter as a magician and you, Beverley, as something like the devil!"

"You really ought to have started some elementary system of education amongst these people," Beverley complained. "I appeal to you, Rudolph Mauranesco, how many of your herdsmen shall I have to kill before they consent to go home? Have you no authority over them? Can you not influence them?"

"They will not listen to me," was the shivering reply. "I tried outside in the courtyard."

Beverley drew a step backwards. He continued talking but his object was to get his back to the wall.

"Mauranesco," he said sternly, "I must remind you that we are your guests here. I came at your invitation, so did Hayter. We came at your request and for your benefit. Are you really proposing to stand there in the background and let these barbarians throw us through that door?"

"My dear friend," Rudolph assured him timorously, "I shall do my best. If they attempt violence I will fight."

"Where's your gun?" Beverley asked. "You had one with you this afternoon."

"They took it away outside," Rudolph wailed.

"That seems a pity. Listen, someone must make these madmen see reason. If you can't, will you translate for me?"

"I will do my best," the young man promised.

"First of all, then, tell them to stop opening that door at the other end of the room."

Mauranesco turned round and called out in a feeble quavering voice to the six men who were pulling and tugging at the great iron bolts. They took not the slightest notice of him. He walked over nearer to them. One of the group thrust out his hand and pushed him on the chest so that he nearly lost his balance. They shook their fists and shouted abusive epithets at him. He turned to Beverley.

"You see how it is," he said despairingly. "I have no influence—no authority. They have lived rent-free on my mountains all their lives and that is how they answer me! I have forbidden them to open The Strangers' Gate. They take no notice."

Almost as he spoke the great key was turned and the door yielded. There was a rush of cold air into the huge vaulted room—a great blank sheet of darkness outside, a star to be seen here and there, a rustling of leaves in the thickly growing ivy, a dislodged family of bats wheeling round, now inside the place, now out. Then there was movement forward amongst the company of men—a great deal of shouting. One huge fellow carrying no weapon but with the bare arms of a Hercules edged his way to within a few yards of Beverley. Beverley remained motionless but his eyes watched every movement of the man who was

closing in upon him. He spoke once more to Treyer, he spoke no louder than usual and with the same half-pleasant drawl which always lent to his voice that peculiar quality of distinctness.

"Treyer," he said, "I have done it before, but I have no fancy for killing men like sheep. Will you in that beautiful language which you have learnt from your friends explain to this gentleman who is within a few feet of me now that if he makes another movement forward it will be his last?"

"Got a gun, have you?" Treyer asked suspiciously.

"Say your little piece," Beverley enjoined without removing his eyes from his approaching assailant.

Treyer shouted something. Whatever it was it seemed only to infuriate the herdsman. His great fist shot out towards Beverley, who dodged it easily, drew the revolver from his pocket and shot him through the chest. With a roar of anger changing almost instantly to a howl of stupefaction—that death-cry of a non-comprehending animal—the herdsman reeled on his feet and fell. Beverley took advantage of the tumult to move a little nearer to Hayter. He called out to him:—

"Get near me, Hayter! I had enough of looking down into the blasted gorge yesterday. We'll die in here if we have to."

"I'll surely be joining you, sir," Hayter agreed enthusiastically, dodging to avoid a blow from one of the crowd and landing his fist well into the face of the ruffian who stepped out to intercept him. "I'm right beside you now, Mr. Beverley. The blackguards can't understand us. How many cartridges have you?"

"Only the full charge that's in the revolver," Beverley answered. "They will probably get tired of this business before I have to use them all, though."

A huge stick came whirling over the heads of the crowd. Beverley dodged just in time to avoid its full force, but there was a nasty wound on his forehead and blood streamed down his cheek. He wiped it away from his eyes and faced the little semi-circle in front of him, his gun following the movement of any one of his assailants who seemed to have the idea of edging nearer. For a few minutes, however, a sort of stupefaction held them spellbound. They were all gaping at the man who lay stretched out on the floor.

"Why not send him through The Strangers' Gate?" Beverley cried. "Save funeral expenses!"

Beverley's attention, although he maintained his attitude of careless indifference, never faltered. He saw the little crowd making way for one of their number who had been leaning against the wall, a youth with black hair smudged over his face, a mouthful of yellow teeth, a creature whose walk even was like the stealthy tread of an animal. His right hand was held behind him but from the first step he had taken Beverley had caught the glitter of steel. There was a shout of incitement from all the others, the meaning of which it was easy to guess. Beverley waited until his approaching assailant stood just behind the semi-circle and stooped to push his way past two men in the front rank.

"Better warn them once more, Treyer," he called out. "When I shoot it is to kill!"

The German laughed out loud. It was a hideous, villainous sound, a ghastly travesty of mirth. Before its echoes had died away the youth who had been crouching sprang into the air, the men in the front of the semi-circle opened on either side, the knife flashed out. His intended victim shot at precisely the right instant. Even before the man could cover those last few yards Beverley's bullet was exactly in the middle of his forehead. There was another Satanic yell, the knife fell clattering to the ground, the semi-circle shrank back.

"Have a heart. Will!" Beverley cried cheerily. "There must be thirty of these ruffians here but I have been watching their faces. Not half of them would dare to come near us. They will have finished with this little business in a few minutes. Rudolph Mauranesco—"

"Oh, my God!" the young man shouted, wringing his hands, "Mr. Beverley, what can I do?"

"Well, there's one thing you could do," was the prompt reply. "Get outside and fetch that gun of yours and come and stand side by side with Hayter and myself against this wall—and if you feel like putting a shot into that scoundrel Treyer as you pass it wouldn't do anyone any harm."

"They will not let me out!" Rudolph cried. "I would have fetched the gun long ago but they will not let me pass through."

"Knock them down, then!" Beverley thundered. "They're your men. You are our host."

Rudolph burst into tears. He was a queer object standing against the wall in a distant corner, his hair neatly parted, his tie still in its place, his beautiful face wrung with anguish, his eyes luminous.

"I would do what I could," he sobbed. "Listen—I speak to them once more."

He called out to the menacing group. They listened to him in dull apathy. There was not a grown man there who since his cradle had heard a kindly or a civil word from this youth who called himself Prince of the Mauranescos. He meant no more to them than the stones they kicked out of their way when climbing. If they understood the words which poured from his lips, they showed no sign of it.

"Drive your fist into the face of one of them," Beverley scoffed. "Perhaps they will listen to you then."

"You do not understand," was the pitiful reply. "I have not that sort of strength. They would kill me if I interfered."

"They apparently mean to kill us if you don't," Beverley answered. "For God's sake fetch a gun and line up with us. Even a shotgun would do some good at this short range."

"They will not let me out," Rudolph repeated in despair. "If I get a chance I will slip through the door."

The semi-circle was slowly closing in. Beverley lifted his voice.

"I don't know whether you want me to go on killing these men, Treyer," he called out, "but if they move another inch I'm going to pick them off one by one."

Up went the German's Up. That hideous grin once more distorted his face.

"You have only four cartridges left," he jeered. "Four men will make no difference here."

"Three," Beverley retorted. "I'm keeping the last one for you!"

"So you would murder me!" Treyer shouted. "That is what you are threatening!"

"And you are doing your best to have me murdered because you are too great a coward to do it yourself," was the furious reply.

The nearest assailant was almost within striking distance, gripping his club, his eyes on fire, his lips parted in ugly fashion. Beverley, after a shout of warning which naturally had no effect, shot him dead. He took careful aim, as he had done each time. Every bullet was fired to kill.

"You are making a slaughter-house of this place, Treyer," he said coolly. "I have two more men to kill—and you. I'm sorry it is necessary. Then I will have to begin on my other pocketful of cartridges."

Treyer laughed mockingly.

"You have no more," he cried out. "I can tell by the look of your pockets."

"Well, there's another gun coming in a minute," Beverley warned him.

"If you are trusting Mauranesco to fetch it you will never see it in this life!" Treyer jeered. "His knees are shaking so that he could not reach even the door."

Four of the ruffians who had been whispering together made a sudden rush. Hayter had stepped forward to administer the coup de grace to his own particular opponent so that for a moment Beverley feared to shoot. Suddenly a rough arm went round his neck, another round his middle. They dragged him away from the wall. One of them—a giant of a fellow—had him for a moment in a grip which threatened to crush his ribs. Hayter snatched up the staff which another had dropped and, swinging it around, got him fairly on the back of the skull. He reeled on his feet and collapsed, gasping and writhing madly. Beverley freed himself, but he had lost the advantage of his former position. In a fierce effort to save the last three bullets, he escaped from the clutch of the remaining man, swung round like lightning and caught him on the point of the jaw. Over he went with a dull groan, and the sound of his head hitting the cement floor was like music to his opponent. The fight was beginning to get into Beverley's blood. A fresh assailant, sidling up, licking his hands to get a firmer grip on his staff, he suddenly sprang at. His first blow the man dodged, the second got him between the eyes. His stick—a short one but thick—fell from his hand. Beverley stooped like lightning, possessed himself of it, and dealt his victim a sweeping blow which laid one side of his face open and finished up at his temple. With a sickening cry this man, too, collapsed. Beverley, however, had been a little too impetuous. Two others were upon him and this time he had to fire. The nearer of them fell like a stone. His companion stood rooted to the spot, his head turned towards the main entrance, making no attempt to move. Beverley, thankful for the unexpected pause, drew a long breath of relief. He was suddenly conscious that the atmosphere of the room had changed. There was a wind sweeping through it. He looked over the heads of the mob and saw the most amazing sight of his life. The door leading to the courtyard stood wide open. Just as he had seen her many times before—unruffled, calm and perfectly composed—Marya was standing there, and a foot behind—Suka. A hush had descended upon the room. Even the groaning of the wounded men seemed to have become subdued. There was something very like silence. Then Marya spoke. Not one word could Beverley understand, but the little crowd of listening herdsmen seemed stricken with something which was almost terror. Although her voice was never once raised, although the anger seemed to dwell in her eyes only, there was something withering, something almost like a lash in the tone of her voice. When she had finished she came a step farther into the room. She was unarmed but no one touched her. Suddenly Suka sprang into the midst of the group and with her strong arms dealt blows right and left. She was like a fury let loose. All the time she covered her mistress, although no one had attempted Marya any harm. She rained blows wherever she could see a face and she shouted at them like a woman possessed. Afterwards Beverley learnt that she was addressing the men by name: uncles, cousins, a brother—every one of them she knew. Three of the worst-looking stood their ground, one even crawled towards Marya with long extended fingers. He seemed as though he were about to grab her in his hands. Marya stood gazing at him, her head thrown a little back, the fire of an intense contempt in her eyes. The man, nevertheless, appeared dangerous. Beverley raised his revolver once more. This was to be a sacred bullet, and it fulfilled its mission. The herdsmen spun round and died at her feet.

"I have only one bullet left, Marya Mauranesco," Beverley called out. "Your brother is incapable of movement. Could you fetch a gun? There is one in the shed outside."

Marya smiled at him and never before had there been such a smile upon her lips. She pointed to the door. In they came trooping—cyclists in the uniform of the Orlacian guards—every one of them armed.

"I have not come alone," she announced. "We outstripped the guards and for a moment I was afraid they might be too late, but they have come. What shall we do with them? The men will obey my orders. The Strangers' Gate is open."

Beverley laughed across at her, wiping the blood from his face at the same time.

"Let them alone," he advised. "Have your escort drive them back to their mountains. If anyone should pass through that Strangers' Gate to-night," he concluded, pointing to Treyer, "there he stands^ The whole of this business was brought about by him."

"It is a lie!" the accused man shouted furiously. "I know a few words of their language, and I was trying all the time to get them to go away quietly."

"You are a lying hound!" Beverley told him. "Not only did you bring these herdsmen here and urge them to attack Hayter and myself, but yesterday, after you had passed me on the road, you dragged a tree across the track until it overhung the precipice. It was attempted murder—nothing more or less. I escaped alive by a miracle. This is your second attempt to get rid of us."

Suka, who had never left off her fierce harangue to the herdsmen, suddenly turned and caught Treyer by the collar, dragging him towards the wide-open Strangers' Gate. His shrieks reached the roof. He struggled like a wild animal, calling madly for help.

"The woman is crazy!" he shouted.

He appealed to the herdsmen in their own language. They watched his agony, stolid and unmoved. Beverley hesitated, but only for a moment.

"Call her back," he begged Marya. "Let Treyer be driven out with the others. We will deal with him later."

Marya spoke half a dozen words, and the woman reluctantly released her captive. Treyer, breathing heavily, pale as death, his face more than ever like that of some wild and evil animal, plunged his hand into his pocket. Something glittering flashed out. He leaned towards Beverley with a sudden shout of triumph. He was unsteady on his feet, however. He lingered for one fatal second to take aim. Beverley's last bullet found its mark. The gun which he had kept carefully concealed went clattering from Treyer's hand to the floor, and the cry with which he collapsed was the cry of death.

The room was emptying fast. The soldiers were driving out the herdsmen before them, the latter as sullen as ever but unresisting. Beverley and Marya stood in a corner of the disordered barn.

"You have saved our lives, Marya Mauranesco," he said. "Your coming was like a miracle."

"It was a very foolish business," she said. "Suka heard in some mysterious way that Treyer was plotting evil things up here with the herdsmen and she warned me."

"And you?"

"I went to the King. He has a heart after all. He sent me here in his car and he sent the special household guard with me. The Diva Katarina sent with them also the men who are detailed to watch her villa. Suka recommends that we leave at once. There are hundreds of these wild people on the mountains and one of the men whom they tell me you killed is their leader. When they realise that he is dead some of the others might come back. Will you and Mr. Hayter please return with us at once? The car waits. First, do you wish that Suka or I shall wipe the blood from your face?"

Beverley laughed softly.

"It is no task for you, Marya," he said. "There is water in the corner. I will be ready in thirty seconds."

He thrust a towel underneath the tap, bathed his face and dried it with a handkerchief. Suka tore herself away from the stampeding mob and talked rapidly to her mistress, who listened to her words carefully. Then she called to Beverley.

"We leave at once," she directed. "Suka tells me that there are more of these vermin climbing the mountains, and when they hear that Brania, their leader, is killed they might try to block our way through the passes."

"Who can tell? It was really you who killed Brania?" she asked Beverley, pointing to the huge fellow who lay on the floor.

"It was Brania or myself," he replied. "I chose Brania."

CHAPTER XXXI

Beverley woke up the next morning in surroundings which were to him at first utterly unrecognisable. The room was flooded with dazzling sunshine, he was conscious of a very severe pain in his left temple and a general soreness all over which completely baffled him. Then memory dribbled back. He remembered the wild excitement of the night before, the strange silent drive in that luxurious car down from the mountains out of the darkness into the dawn and the sting of the early wind as they descended to the lowlands. And Marya had all the time been by his side. He had dim recollections of the car's having stopped once on the way when Marya sent the chauffeur for water from one of those streams which fell from the heights across the road down into the valley. He felt again the touch of her fingers upon his forehead, the bandage, her calm words as she made a pillow for his head and suffered her hand to be held in his. And now she was gone. He could scarcely remember a farewell. Hayter had helped him into the hotel, and of course this was his room, but more amazing than anything else in the world seemed the figure seated in an easy chair not far from the bedside.

"Rudolph Mauranesco!" he exclaimed incredulously.

Rudolph rose to his feet. He was fresh and smiling. He had evidently bathed and submitted himself to the ministrations of the *coiffeur*. He was wearing a very well-cut suit of clothes and his expression was one of complete satisfaction with the world and himself.

"So you are awake at last!" he exclaimed. "Good. It would have been necessary to have shaken you in a few minutes. We have an appointment at twelve o'clock."

"Have we?" Beverley murmured. "With whom? Some more of your goatherds?"

Rudolph waved the suggestion away.

"My dear Mr. Beverley," he remonstrated, "that was an absurd outbreak. I remember very little of it myself. I was far from well last night but I remember that there was trouble. We got you out of it all right though. My sister fetched you home and I followed close behind with the guards in case there should be an attack. This morning I have devoted my whole time to our affairs."

"Marvellous!" Beverley muttered. "Mind ringing the bell? I want a jugful of tea."

Rudolph did as he was bidden, A waiter appeared very soon and received the order. A valet also, a queer fellow in a jersey and a pair of serge trousers, made his appearance.

"A bath," Beverley ordered, "a full bath, mind—a big one. Hot at first but a jug of cold water to throw over me afterwards. Does he get that, Mauranesco?"

Rudolph made the matter perfectly clear. In twenty minutes Beverley had drunk his tea, had had a bath which felt as though the waters of Elysium were being poured over him, and now sat at his table shaving.

"Come on, my young visitor," he begged. "Talk to me."

"Hayter's discovery," Rudolph replied, rolling a cigarette lightly, "will mean a different life for myself, at any rate, and for Marya, I hope, except that she will be very hard to move. I had a few words with Hayter after you had come up to bed and he seems perfectly convinced about the bauxite."

Beverley watched the young man through the looking-glass. His tone was confident, his eyes eager.

"Now listen," Rudolph went on. "You are a man of business, Mr. Beverley, a man of marvellous intelligence. I know what you are saying to yourself: 'I will go no further with this until I know to whom the land belongs.'"

"There is a certain amount of common sense in that," Beverley admitted.

"It is all arranged," Rudolph assured him. "You will be happy to know that the notaries who for generation after generation have handled the affairs of the Mauranescos are the firm of which the new premier, Predor Pravadia, was once an active partner. He is too busy now for serious work but he is more interested in bauxite than any other man in the country. I have arranged a rendezvous for twelve o'clock. There will be you, myself—representing my sister and myself—our notary who holds the title deeds of the mountains, Dr. Halles, the first lawyer in the kingdom, and your specialist Hayter if you desire his presence."

"What are we all going to do?" Beverley asked, sponging his face.

"I have thought that out," the young man proceeded. "You are a cautious man. You do not want to go too far without absolute proof of the things which you are told, even by your own expert. My suggestion is that you pay us a sum down at once—cash—for the option to search for bauxite on the Mauranesco Mountains; and at the end of three months, or any stipulated period, you deal with the owners—my sister and myself—either in the way of direct purchase or by means of a concession which will enable you to build your mine and produce your bauxite. Side by side with that, we give you a written agreement to deal with no one else in the matter until you have given your decision. Your option covers everything."

"This is not Crown Land then?"

"It is not, but I will be perfectly frank with you," Rudolph continued with a gesture of most engaging candour. "The new Government of Orlac, as represented by Predor Pravadia, will bring forward a claim

which by means of old statutes they might probably be able to substantiate. They will demand a royalty upon your output, a royalty which will go to the people."

"By the by, there is no one else in the running for this bauxite just now, is there?" Beverley demanded. "Is it part of a nightmare—did I dream it or did that disagreeable fellow Treyer come to an unfortunate end last night?"

Rudolph's expression for a moment was one of great gravity.

"Last night's affairs," he confided, "lie behind a cloud so far as I am concerned. I felt myself on the brink of serious illness and I can remember nothing. I do believe, however, that Treyer, who after all was responsible for getting that herd of wild men together, met with a most unfortunate accident."

"I dreamed, or perhaps it was the truth," Beverley said, "that even if he escaped the ordeal of passing through that picturesque door of yours which you call 'The Strangers' Gate' he nevertheless took his departure into a world from which he is not likely to trouble us any more."

Rudolph shivered. Something of his gay insouciance had departed.

"Do not let us talk of it," he begged. "It was a terrible happening. All that we have to remember for the moment is this: we shall not have Herr Treyer to deal with. Treyer himself was entirely responsible for everything that happened at the castle last night and he has paid the price. He will interfere no more with us."

"That certainly simplifies matters," Beverley observed drily. "Any further news from your mountain home?"

"Nothing will ever again be heard of that little outbreak," Rudolph confided. "The herdsmen were driven back to their shelters on the hills and to their village down on the lowlands. They are a pack of men outside the paths of civilisation. There are very few people who even understand their dialect. They are not to be considered."

"Tell me this once more: How was it that your sister arrived just as we were all of us—excepting you and Treyer, I suppose—on the point of being murdered?"

"I will explain my sister's arrival," Rudolph answered, "but it is absurd to think for a moment that we should have allowed matters to proceed to such extremities. I had already sent for help. We should have been able to drive those fellows out in a few minutes."

"Do you mind leaving that all out?" Beverley begged. "Tell me how it was that your sister arrived."

"It was through her woman Suka," the young man explained. "She got to know in some mysterious way, which neither I nor anyone else could explain, that Treyer was there stirring up the herdsmen and that they were going to escort a strange Englishman, who wanted to drive them from their mountains and take away their livelihood, through The Strangers' Gate. It was the way by means of which my ancestors in the days of barbarism used to get rid of their prisoners when they took any. It seems to me that Marya did a very sensible thing. She left the House of Passers-by under her aunt's protection, and she went to the King. Nicolas heard what she had to say, gave her his own car, and at Katarina's insistence ordered out his own bodyguard. No other form of soldiery except this motorcycle corps could have reached the castle so quickly. I think you may say, Mr. Beverley, that you owe your escape from a certain amount of inconvenience, at any rate, largely to my sister and myself."

Beverley lit a cigarette and looked the young man in the face for a moment without speech. The latter did not for a moment flinch. He spoke as though he believed what he was saying.

"You are the most amazing person I ever met in my life, Rudolph Mauranesco," was all that Beverley could find it in his mind to remark.

"Coming from you, sir," was the delightfully-spoken reply, "that speech has made me very happy."

Beverley swallowed some coffee, ate a couple of rolls, lit a further cigarette and sent for Hayter.

"I must now say *Au revoir* to you, Rudolph Mauranesco," he said. "My last words before we meet at midday must be with Hayter alone."

"Does it matter about me?" Rudolph asked smiling.

"It matters a whole hell of a lot," Beverley told him. "Out you go! I will meet you in the café at five minutes to twelve."

The young man rose reluctantly.

"It shall be just as you wish, Mr. Beverley," he agreed.

Hayter, who had been waiting in the next room, made his appearance. He greeted his employer with a little chuckle.

"I'm glad to see you round and about, Mr. Beverley," he said. "I have been handing you compliments in my sleep all night. I've been in tough scraps in many parts of the world but I've never seen one better handled."

"Listen to me. Will Hayter," Beverley began: "Is there any chance of a flaw anywhere, of any possible mistake as regards this bauxite?"

"There's nothing wrong with the bauxite, Mr. Beverley," Hayter replied earnestly, "but I've a wee story to tell you that might amuse you. I'm hoping you've confidence enough in me to take it the right way."

"No fear of my not doing that," Beverley promised. "Go ahead."

"That young scoundrel of last night—my God, what a specimen!—he came to me before we went up north and he told me frankly that he did not believe there was anything in the way of bauxite to be found in his mountains. All the same, he reminded me that as you were going up there and taking me with you it would certainly be up to me to make a report."

"That was a good start," Beverley observed drily.

"I must say," Hayter went on, pushing the tobacco a little farther down in his pipe and pulling at it steadily, "I have never met with a scoundrel in my life who made a rascally suggestion in a more delightful fashion than that young man. He did not expect big things, but he made a proposition which he thought I could not fail to accept. I was to find a reasonable amount of bauxite—some bauxite—not much—no huge quantities that would lead to disappointment and get me into trouble, but just enough for you to buy an option upon the mountains and pay cash quick."

"And what did you say to that, Hayter?"

"What any man with common sense in the circumstances would have said," Hayter replied. "He offered me a quarter of anything you paid over!"

"Did he put it in writing?"

"He surely did. Am I a Scotsman for nothing?"

Beverley leaned back in his chair and began to laugh. He went on laughing till the tears stood in his eyes.

"Are you going to hold him to this, Hayter?" he enquired.

"Unless you object, Mr. Beverley. I don't see any flaw in it myself. The young bounder made a criminal suggestion to an honest man and I think he should pay for it. I'm not taking the trouble to tell you it never affected my report for one single second. To tell you the truth it will be the humiliation of my life to think that I went over those mountains and left the southern ridges alone. Your mountain and the Klast Mine will give you enough bauxite, Mr. Beverley, to supply the whole world if you want to."

"Then you will be a rich man, Will," Beverley remarked, chuckling. "How that young man will hate parting!"

"I'll make a heap, sir, but it won't be you that will pay for it. That's not saying I'm not properly grateful," he went on hurriedly, "It's what I call a perfect case of the biter bit."

"Try to go on looking like an honest man, Hayter," Beverley advised him, rising to his feet with a twinkle in his eyes. "All the same, I'm glad you have something in writing."

It was a queer little meeting that took place a few minutes later. Messrs. Zalaberg and Carneola, the two principal lawyers of Klast, sat side by side at separate desks in their office. Predor Pravadia, acting as witness and general counsellor, sprawled in an easy chair. Rudolph Mauranesco sat with folded arms on a bench against the wall. Will Hayter did not appear. Beverley was offered what was really the seat of honour—an easy chair opposite Pravadia. Pravadia, huge and vigorous, was in fine spirits. The final result of the outstanding elections had come in that morning and each one of them had gone solidly to his party. He shook hands heartily with Beverley as he entered and presented him to the two lawyers.

"Delighted to welcome you back from the savage districts, Mr. Beverley," he said. "Here is this young fellow Mauranesco with an amazing story. He says your expert has found bauxite there."

"From a somewhat superficial search," Beverley admitted, "my expert, Mr. Hayter, is inclined to believe that there is a certain amount of bauxite on the southern ridges. Whether it would be a payable proposition to mine for it is another matter."

"Listen," Rudolph intervened, rising to his feet. "This need not be a long meeting. The greater issues do not arise yet. Mr. Zalaberg and Mr. Carneola are the representatives of a firm who have been lawyers to the House of Mauranesco for hundreds of years. Will you, Mr. Zalaberg, tell Mr. Beverley that what I say is a fact?"

Both men rose to their feet and bowed.

"It is perfectly true, sir," Zalaberg announced.

"To continue," Rudolph went on, "the mountains are the property of whom, Mr. Zalaberg?"

"The mountains are the property of yourself. Prince Rudolph Mauranesco, and of the Princess Marya Mauranesco, your sister."

"You hear that, Mr. Beverley?" Rudolph asked.

"I hear it."

"You are satisfied?"

"Naturally I am satisfied."

"What sort of offer, then, do you propose to make on behalf of my sister and myself for those mountains?"

"I am not prepared to buy them," Beverley declared calmly, "but I am prepared to give you a certain sum down—"

"Cash," Rudolph murmured.

"A certain sum down in cash," Beverley repeated, "for an option, which you will write out and sign here before your two notaries and Mr. Pravadia, giving me six months to make up my mind whether I will purchase and sink a mine or not. If at the end of that time I decide not to mine, the sum I pay for the option will be forfeited to you and your sister. That is the situation so far as I am concerned, gentlemen," Beverley went on, turning to the others. "No one can buy a whole district of wild land after only a few days' inspection. We should have a number of things to consider before we took the risk of starting a great undertaking up there in that desolate spot."

"A sound business point of view," Pravadia admitted.

"The question is," Rudolph said, "how much Mr. Beverley k prepared to put down for the option. I know very little of my sister's means. There are wealthy relations who do not approve of me, but I know my own position. I am perfectly penniless. I need money. I am giving myself away but I cannot help it. I am a truthful person. I shall throw myself upon Mr. Beverley's consideration and ask him to make as generous an offer as possible."

"I think for an option of this description," Beverley announced, "which I may never take up, thirty thousand pounds would be a very fair sum, fifteen thousand payable to you and fifteen thousand payable to your sister."

"It is not enough," Rudolph insisted with a little gasp in his throat which he could not wholly control.

The lawyers remained silent. The eyes of both of them were fixed upon the ceiling. Thirty thousand pounds from which to draw something towards that bill of costs which had been steadily mounting for two generations, thirty thousand pounds for a range of hills which during the memory of man had been simply the scanty grazing ground for an army of goats! They trembled when Beverley stooped down as though to pick up his hat.

"I will think it over, if you like," he proposed, "but at present I cannot see my way clear to give more."

"There are other interests in the market," Rudolph warned him, biting his nails furiously.

"The less you talk about them the better, I should think," Beverley remarked drily. "You would like to wait a few days, perhaps, and see whether they materialise?"

There was a dark flush on the young man's face.

"I accept the sum you have offered, Mr. Beverley," he decided. "You can pay it to my attorneys here and as soon as you do I will sign the option. I shall act as my sister's trustee," he went on, "so you may as well put the whole amount in my name."

"I am perfectly certain," Beverley declared, "that your lawyer would not consent to that course, and I am perfectly certain that as you are joint owners I shall pay half to each of you. I shall give you two drafts on the Bank of England—one payable to Marya Mauranesco and one to Rudolph Mauranesco—and they will be honoured on receipt of a telegraphic advice that they are in your hands. You will touch the money tomorrow, I should think, without fail. Is that satisfactory? If so, draw up the option, Mr. Zalaberg."

"But Mr. Beverley," Rudolph protested gently with a complete return of his usual charm of manner, "you surely would not mistrust my handling my sister's money. If she were here she would confide it to me in a moment."

"The Princess is in the next room," Mr. Zalaberg murmured. "It would not have been possible to have come to any definite arrangement without her signature."

Rudolph surrendered gracefully.

"The matter is really of no consequence," he declared. "Mr. Beverley can make out his drafts as he suggests."

A clerk was called in. The option was duly engrossed Beverley produced his leather bound book of drafts which he always carried with him and wrote out two. Mr. Zalaberg rose to his feet.

"I will invite the Princess to come and sign," he proposed, leaving the room.

Beverley drew his chair back to a more remote corner. For the first time in his life his own condition of mind puzzled him. He was conscious of some queer return of the strain which he had suffered during that long wonderful drive in the darkness. He hated the people around. Every nerve in his body was tingling with the desire to see her, to hear her voice, the soft flutter of her garments, to catch the look in her eyes as she entered. But Mr. Zalaberg returned alone.

"The Princess requests," he announced, "that the copy be sent in to her for signature. I shall take the draft at the same time. Perhaps Mr. Beverley—"

Beverley shook his head.

"You will hand the Princess the draft with my best wishes," he said. "Before she leaves, however, I should consider it a great favour if she would spare me a moment."

Mr. Zalaberg took out the papers and returned a minute or two later.

"If you will step this way, Mr. Beverley," he invited, "the Princess will be glad to see you, but as the chariot—we always call it that—from the convent is waiting for her outside with one of the lay sisters, she asks that you will pay your visit at once. This way, sir."

Beverley rose to his feet. Mr. Zalaberg threw open the door of a small waiting room, ushered him in and retreated at once. Beverley and Marya stood alone in the room, face to face.

"Marya," he ventured, "I had no words last night."

"Nor I," she answered. "It was surely not wonderful that we should find speech difficult. I had never seen bloodshed."

"You are going back to the convent?"

"It was my promise to Sister Georgina before she let me start on my wild journey."

"I have offered you no thanks—I have not dared to say to you the things which you know are here in my heart, Marya. I have held my peace because I felt that after that crowded hour of horrors it was no time for me to speak of the other things. But you must tell me, please, because in all my future life there is nothing that would make the difference that your answer will make—I do not care about your mountains or what they will produce—I care for something else. You are going back to the convent, Marya?"

She raised her eyes for the first time. They would have appeared much the same to anyone else, but not to Nigel Beverley. He told himself with a sort of passionate though silent conviction that she was looking at him differently. He leaned forward eagerly. He drank in the memory of them.

He was to be left alone, he must have something, some shred of hope to cling to—and it lay in her eyes.

"I am going back," she told him, "because that was my promise. I am going back, but only to the House of Passers-by until the time comes when I have to make my choice. And when that time comes," she went on, "believe me, I shall remember things you have said, I shall remember what you have been to me, I shall remember the happiness I felt when I was able to come to your help last night, and I shall remember how brave a figure you seemed there amongst all those ruffians. What a dear memory I shall carry with me in my heart—and if you please—that is all I can say."

"And I," he said, "shall add only one small, such a very small, thing. Will you give me your hand, please?"

She laid it in his after a moment's hesitation—cool and delicate it felt, like a lily which had been floating in ice cold water.

"I shall remember that through those long hours of the night, Marya, you allowed your hand to rest in mine. It is that which will give me hope that some day you will give it to me forever."

He raised it reverently to his lips, kissed it, delayed perhaps just for a moment, looked into her eyes once more, caught the beauty of that glimmering smile and turned away. He walked back into the lawyers' den like a man who walks upon air.

CHAPTER XXXII

Beverley sat once more at his desk in the private office of the president of the Anglo-Orlacian Trust Company in Gracechurch Street. His father-in-law-that-was-to-have-been occupied the easy chair generally reserved for visitors. Lord Portington, in great good humour, drew the red carnation which he was wearing a little more securely through his buttonhole and indulged in the familiar gesture of letting his fingers wander about his upper lip.

"It was an absolutely wonderful meeting, Nigel," he declared. "I have never seen such enthusiasm. Not that you didn't deserve every bit of it, my boy. You pulled the company out of what might have been a nasty hole, you have doubled the value of our shares, and you are in high favour at the Foreign Office."

Life's a queer bag of tricks. To think of all this coming from a little violin-playing lady calling here with a piece of rock in her handbag! By the by, do you ever hear from her, Nigel?"

Beverley stiffened a little. His tone was colourless,

"No," he replied, "I have heard nothing from her since I left Orlac. Her brother, of course, has pestered us with letters. We had to tell him at last that all further negotiations must be conducted through our lawyers."

"What has he to worry about?" Portington demanded. "He has made a huge fortune—so has the little lady. Of course that deal was practically a certainty when we got the second report about the Mauranesco Mountains. Where I think you were lucky, Nigel, was in the way the City took those Orlacian bonds. How you had the courage to offer to underwrite and dispose of a million pounds' worth of paper for a struggling country like Orlac beats me."

"I had talked to Pravadia," Beverley explained a little listlessly. "I had made up my mind that he was a man with a great future. The election was assured before I made the deal with him."

"But until he went into office he was an out-and-out Left Winger," Portington observed. "One of those dangerous sort of chaps living on the borderland between socialism and communism who are all out for confiscating everything. Can't imagine how you had the courage to trust him as you did."

"He is the people's man, of course," Beverley admitted, "but Orlac is a country which could only be governed by a people's man, and he went about it in the right fashion. Its aristocracy has shrunk away, it never possessed a solid bourgeoisie. It is a country of small properties and small holdings. The people don't want to lose what they have and Pravadia will see to it that they don't. Of course the mines will always be the backbone of their prosperity, but they are commencing to manufacture boots and shoes, clothes and many things on their own account. Pravadia will never be content until they are a self-supporting people and he will never default."

"Has the King ever interfered at all since the new Constitution was established?"

Beverley shook his head.

"Too sensible. His finances depend entirely upon the State, and Nicolas is shrewd enough to know that it pays him to keep the Constitution just as it is."

"Well, I've had enough of Orlac for one morning," Portington declared. "Come and have some lunch, Nigel. We'll do ourselves well. There's some old Berncasteler Doctor at the Milan Grill—"

"I'll join you there in half an hour," Beverley interrupted.

"I want to look through the minutes of the meeting, have a word or two with the Press and sign my letters."

Miss Dent came silently into the room. She was holding a card in her hand. She laid it down on the desk in front of her employer without remark. He bent over it, glanced at the name and remained for a moment motionless.

"Anyone special?" Portington asked curiously.

Still Beverley made no immediate reply. Memories were crowding in upon him. Scarcely knowing what he did, he read aloud from the card:—

Princess Marya Mauranesco

"My God!" Portington exclaimed, rising briskly to his feet. "It's the little violinist!"

Beverley was himself again, except that his blood was coursing fiercely through his veins. He preserved his composure because he was a strong man, but an almost unbearable crowd of emotions had seized him in their grip.

"A very different personage now," he remarked. "You will excuse me, won't you, sir, if I hurry you off?"

"Aren't I to be allowed to see the young lady?" Portington asked with visible disappointment.

"Not this time. Later on, perhaps. Will you show the Princess in. Miss Dent?"

Lord Portington took his leave grumbling good-naturedly. Beverley rose to his feet. All the confusion of the last few minutes seemed to have passed like magic. Perhaps Miss Dent had guessed what lay behind that added sternness which they had all noticed in Beverley since his return from Orlac. At any rate, she behaved like a young woman of tact. She opened the door, closed it again and disappeared as soon as his visitor had passed in. Very slowly Marya came towards the desk. She avoided the chair where she had sat before. She came to where Beverley was standing and looked up into his face.

"I have come back, Nigel Beverley," she announced. "Am I welcome?"

"You will give me your hand again?" he asked.

She held it out.

"It is yours," she said simply.

He grasped it firmly. There was surprise as well as deep happiness in those clear eyes which seemed to be devouring hers.

"Why, you are trembling, Nigel," she murmured.

"I am afraid of my happiness," he told her. "I am almost afraid to touch you."

Then she laughed softly and joyously.

"You must forget all your fears," she begged. "It is not because of the money that I have changed. That would have made no difference. I stayed, as I told you I should, for those months at the convent, and there is no place more beautiful on earth. Everything around me was soothing and sweet. The cedars—my own trees—whispered to me in the night and the flowers made the mornings marvellous. I was on my knees sometimes for hours during the day; I tried everything that I could; and I failed. Perhaps my heart was not in my efforts, that I failed."

"Failed?" he repeated.

"To forget you, Nigel," she said. "To forget that there was another life to be lived."

"You have come to me for always?" he asked, and the man whose splendid firmness was the talk of everyone who came in contact with him lost it all at that moment and his voice shook.

She leaned a little towards him and her arms went around his neck.

"You treated me always so sweetly," she whispered, "and I have grown to love you for the memory of it. Now please take me. Sister Georgina has given her blessing and sent me to you—and I am very happy."

They lunched at the Ritz. As they entered the restaurant Marya sent a message up to her apartment.

"I have a chaperon," she explained. "She will not trouble us very much but you must meet her. I have sent for her to come down to lunch. She is a sister of my Aunt Georgina, and she married an Austrian—the Archduke Karl Heinrich. They are very poor and she makes a little money helping people choose clothes. You do not mind?"

"Of course not," he answered gaily. "Do you think that I could mind anything?"

The Archduchess, who presently made her appearance, was a very distinguished and pleasant lady, with a strong likeness to her sister. Marya's introduction was typical.

"This is Mr. Nigel Beverley, Aunt," she said, "whom I have come over to London to ask to marry me. You will be glad to know that he has consented. This is my aunt, Nigel, the Archduchess of Meiningen Staubnitz."

The Archduchess was charming. She approved of Beverley and it was not long before she told him so. They were halfway through a very friendly little lunch when a note was brought to Beverley. He asked permission and tore it open.

"Who is your amazingly beautiful companion? Ask her at once where she gets her frocks—and what are you doing, Nigel, lunching with an Archduchess?"

"An old friend of mine," Beverley explained, "wants to know where you get your frocks, Marya."

"Paquin and Worth, so far," the Archduchess confided. "But up till now I have been able to get her to take very little interest in what is generally the first thought in a young girl's life. Clothes are really quite important."

"Oh, I shall begin to think about them directly," Marya said smiling. "Will you come with us this afternoon, Nigel, and help choose my trousseau?"

Beverley looked up from scribbling his reply to Ursula's note.

"I will come anywhere if the Archduchess permits."

"Of course," the latter agreed. "I shall not be a burden upon you for long, as I have an important visit of ceremony to make. We can commence, though, immediately after luncheon. This evening I shall leave you altogether to yourselves."

Beverley smiled.

"After all," he whispered across the table, "I am going to take you shopping, Marya!"

THE END

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